

# Case Study: How a Multi-Jurisdictional Team Enabled Clear, Consistent, Community-Wide COVID-19 Communications

# **OVERVIEW**

COVID-19 has challenged all of us, including governments and public institutions, to quickly innovate and mobilize in response to the deadly global pandemic. The early months of 2020 found entities across the country and around the world trying to save lives and struggling to provide clear direction and consistent information at a time when little was absolute and conflicting reports often caused confusion, anxiety, and fear.

In the weeks after COVID-19 prompted stay-at-home orders in California, the City of Davis (City) and the University of California, Davis (UCD), aligned to create a joint response to the pandemic, known as Healthy Davis Together (HDT). HDT was created with a bold goal to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and facilitate a coordinated and gradual return to regular city activities and reintegration of UC Davis students back into school and community life.

With the expertise of UCD faculty and staff, and the reach and authority of the City, the vision was to extend resources that were already being offered on the university campus – like testing, environmental monitoring, and health promotion to the entire community. In addition, the HDT effort created new avenues—including business partnerships, student public health ambassadors, and multi-lingual mass communications—to amplify public health messages and encourage healthy behaviors to stop the spread.

A key component for success was the collaboration of a multi-jurisdictional communications team. While our initial intent was to create a regular place and time to share information and updates across parties, we quickly formalized roles and structure so that our connected team could communicate across our resident, business, university, K-12 schools, farm worker and non-English speaking communities. We also helped our communities navigate ever-changing developments in the COVID landscape with clear and consistent messages encouraging everyone to adhere to public health guidance and utilize the free resources available.

Thirteen months into the effort<sup>1</sup>, Davis has successfully re-opened businesses, reintegrated more than 30,000 college students back into the community, opened schools full-time without a significant increase in COVID-19, maintained a COVID-19 case positivity rate 64% lower compared to California's rate statewide. Nearly nine in 10 (86%) residents have heard about HDT, and nearly nine in 10 (86%) are satisfied with the City's response to the pandemic<sup>2</sup>.

This paper outlines the structure, decision-making, and approval processes that equipped the HDT communications team to work in an integrated way. Our aim is to provide an overview of our experiences and lessons learned that can be used by other communications professionals as we find ourselves facing evermore life-threatening challenges, whether those be pandemics, fire, floods, or other public health crises.

<sup>2</sup> EMC survey of Davis residents, September 2021, N=400





HDT launched September 2020; this case study was written in October 2021

## **COMMUNICATIONS TEAM OBJECTIVES**

Like other communities across the country and across the globe, Davis grappled with the need to take immediate steps to promote the safety of community members through policy and programmatic actions during the early weeks of the pandemic. Very quickly, the need to provide accurate, clear, and timely communications became one of the single highest priorities in Davis. While the City of Davis had its own emergency communications structure in place (see sidebar), the joining of the City and the University through Healthy Davis Together created a new opportunity to coordinate on messaging and communications.

From the project's onset, the HDT Communications Team recognized that our structure needed to ensure we could:

- Effectively serve the people of Davis, including city residents, those who work here, and all members of the UCD community;
- Disseminate COVID-19 updates and information coming from the federal government, State of California, Yolo County, the City of Davis, and subject matter experts at UC Davis;
- Update communications messages and materials quickly and frequently; and
- Regularly distribute communications through all means possible to ensure information reaches community members, businesses, schools, and hard-to-reach populations.

Within this framework, the HDT Communications Team was charged with developing and implementing campaigns to:

- Promote healthy behaviors in alignment with current public health guidance;
- Drive registrations for regular testing;
- Promote its business partner program;
- Share information about safe opening plans (businesses, schools); and
- Share information about vaccine availability.

The initial plans called for use of integrated paid media, social media, and earned media to keep community members updated with accurate and timely information. Other activations including community art projects, mobile billboards and creative incentives were implemented to engage the community and bring awareness to the HDT and the resources available.

It should be noted that all of these activities required a significant investment of time and resources. HDT was funded by state and federal grants, major philanthropic donations and federal CARES Act resources. These investments allowed HDT to make significant investments in many of its program elements, including communications. Specifically, investments in communications allowed HDT to hire a communications agency; develop television, radio, print, outdoor and social media advertisements; pay for media placement; develop and maintain digital media channels; support partner engagement; and conduct focus groups and bi-monthly tracking surveys to inform messaging and track the effectiveness of communications.

# City of Davis Emergency Operations Center

Prior to engaging in conversations about HDT, the City of Davis City Manager had convened an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) as the City's central command-and-control entity responsible for carrying out COVID-19 emergency preparedness and emergency management operations. The EOC included Incident Commanders, a Public Information Officer (PIO) and Chiefs with positions filled by Police and Fire Chiefs and other City Department Directors or staff. The EOC empowered the PIO with a clear framework for operating even as the crisis worsened and messaging shifted with the frequent changes in federal, state, and local guidance. The PIO became the City's lead on the HDT communications team.





# **TEAM STRUCTURE: PHASE 1**

In the first months of the effort, the core team consisted of representatives from a communications agency, the City of Davis, UC Davis and the HDT Executive team. This structure centralized our efforts, built on the City's existing pandemic response system and allowed us to quickly share updates as we had them, strategize on messages and outreach, and coordinate across our respective communications channels.

Entity	Roles
Communications Agency Communications lead supported by experts in earned media, paid media, and creative	Develop HDT brand, look and feel Develop overarching communications plan Lead on awareness and behavioral benchmarking research Coordinate strategic communications Develop core messages Develop creative assets (e.g. social content, videos, ads)
City of Davis Public information officers from the City's Emergency Operations Center	Develop and distribute city-wide communications  Review and approve messages and creative content  Offer local perspective on creative and messaging
UC Davis Communications leaders from UC Davis Health, UCD Strategic Communications Office, and the Division of Student Affairs	Develop and distribute campus communications  Coordinate across UCD offices  Review and approve messages and creative content
HDT Executive Team Member (ET) One representative of the ET – the group responsible for oversight of the entire HDT initiative	Participate in communications meetings Inform the group of programmatic updates

At weekly, standing HDT communications meetings, the communications agency led the team through the process of aligning on strategy. Each individual on this team came into the process already heavily engaged in communications efforts on behalf of their organization. Much of the early work of the team consisted of each member sharing details of their communications outreach. It became readily apparent that all individual outreach could—and should—be viewed as parallel efforts with important intersections in the HDT outreach campaign.

Alignment across our organizations allowed us to be consistent in our messaging, and ensure that whether residents, workers and others were seeing information in the news, the City website or HDT social media, they were seeing messages that echoed and reinforced each other.





An early example of this collaboration is the initial messaging about testing for the COVID-19 virus:

- Messaging that supported testing based on HDT recommendations was first included as a part of the weekly UCD Chancellor's email message to university employees and students;
- The same message was reinforced shortly afterward with an op ed in the local newspaper authored by the City's Mayor and UCD's Chancellor;
- The City published the information in an electronic newsletter that was distributed communitywide; and
- HDT social media echoed the benefits of the free, easy, and painless testing offered by HDT with strong encouragement to test regularly.

Because the multiple jurisdictions were coordinating through the HDT Communications Team, all messages were aligned – reinforcing each other so that the community was receiving clear and consistent information and encouragement to follow public health guidance.

# **TEAM STRUCTURE: PHASE 2**

Within several months of operating as an integrated team, the HDT Communications Team discovered the need to include additional key partners, including Davis Joint Unified School District and Yolo County. Because the City of Davis has no jurisdiction over the public schools and the City operates under the guidance of the Public Health Officer of Yolo County, it quickly became clear that collaboration with these entities was crucial to providing clear and consistent information to the public.

Entity	Roles
HDT Executive Team 1-2 members	Ensure alignment of all HDT program components  Provide staff to support scheduling, note-taking, etc.  Share all agendas and notes in a co-working space on the cloud
Communications & Public Affairs Agency 1-2 members	Provide overall strategic guidance Coordinate strategic communications Develop core messages Lead creative development and execution Lead media planning & placement Lead on awareness and behavioral benchmarking research
City of Davis, Director of Community Engagement/PIO for the Emergency Operations Center	Lead communications efforts for the City  Ensure coordination of HDT comms efforts across all City depts.  Provided key insights to the needs of the community  Ensure City review and approval of all HDT Comms materials
UC Davis Strategic Communications Office  – Director of News and Media Relations	Lead communications efforts for the University Ensure coordination of HDT comms efforts across all depts. Provided key insights to the needs of the University community Ensure University review and approval of all HDT Comms materials





UC Davis Division of Student Affairs - Director of Marketing and Communications	Provide updates on student communications  Provide updates on UCD Campus Ready campaign (which coordinates the return-to-campus effort for employees and students)  Provide insights on student-specific outreach and messaging
UC Davis Government and Community Relations	Communicate HDT updates to City and County officials Share information with elected leaders
County of Yolo, Public Information Officer	Provide information about the County's marketing, testing, and vaccine efforts  Support coordination with HDT Comms Team  Provide regular updates on COVID-19 infection rates and health orders
Davis Joint Unified School District, Public Information Officer	Provide information about the district's communications efforts  Manage distribution of communications to parents/families through district-owned channels  Coordinate with individual schools on communications materials  Coordinate review and input from district and school leadership

This expanded team had a variety of audiences and timelines, but worked together so that messaging from one agency echoed and complemented others. For example, in early spring of 2021, a topic of great concern was students returning to live instruction in Davis public schools:

- HDT supported the reopening of schools with guidance on how to create safe spaces and practices
  within the school building, the set-up and provision of free asymptomatic testing onsite, masks, hand
  sanitizer, and air filters for classrooms;
- The HDT comms team, under the leadership of the communications agency, developed clear and consistent messaging about school re-openings and what schools and staff would be doing to keep students and the community safe;
- HDT created city-wide advertising that supported increased testing and was targeted to school students, faculty, and staff;
- The City and school district shared plans about safe school re-opening through multiple channels including media outreach, email newsletters, and Zoom meetings with parents and the community; and
- The City ran an Instagram contest for teens to highlight pics of them getting tested as a tactic to target this particular age group.

# **ALIGNED MESSAGING, MATERIALS AND OUTREACH**

Throughout the course of the pandemic, the HDT Comms Team was charged with developing and implementing campaigns to:

- Promote healthy behaviors in alignment with current public health guidance;
- Drive registration for regular asymptomatic testing (a cornerstone of the HDT program);
- Promote enrollment and community awareness of its business partner program;





- Share information about safe business and school opening plans; and
- Share information about vaccine availability.

Given the significant population of Spanish and Russian-speaking individuals living and working in Davis and Yolo County, great care was taken to develop materials that were inclusive, culturally relevant, and available in Spanish and Russian.

The HDT Comms Teams and its weekly meetings became a trusted place to brainstorm, share ideas, address communications challenges and opportunities, and jointly review documents. Each individual entity's representative then was responsible for gaining needed approvals on messaging and materials from their organization.

The HDT Comms Team activities included, but were not limited to:

#### Messaging **Briefing Kit for Internal HDT Team Use** Overall Message Platform Talking Points Messages for Key Audiences **FAQs** Talking points Where to get more info **Outreach Materials Business-Focused Materials** Website Window signs, cash register signs, A-frame placards Flyers, posters, yard signs, banners HDT-branded napkins, stickers, face masks, Newsletter and email content hand sanitizer, pop-up tents Videos Photos Translations Culturally informed outreach materials Comms Toolkit for Elected Officials, Local Leaders, Social Media **Community Partners** Content calendar Key messages Routinely updated messages, graphics Template materials Photos, videos Social media graphics Art created with local residents **Earned Media Paid Advertising** Story development Paid media plans Spokesperson prep Social, cable, print, billboards, bus panels Media list development Paid media performance and optimization Press releases and outreach to individual reporters

See Appendix A for examples of HDT's outreach materials.





# LESSONS LEARNED

- 1. Set clear guidelines for decision-making. A significant challenge for a multi-jurisdictional team is creating a structure that sets clear guidelines for decision-making. Because each partner is an independent organization, each required time to review and gain input throughout their own internal teams. In addition, much of the information we received was often specific to medical or public health terminology and the desire of experts to be fully accurate sometimes conflicted with the way in which a communications specialist writes for the best understanding of their audience. While compromises were reached, and no major issues remained unresolved for long, having a clear structure for how much time to give reviews, and who has the ultimate sign-off authority, could have saved time.
- 2. Establish a clear process for tracking and approvals. At any given time, there were a number of documents and materials being developed and reviewed. HDT Comms Team reviews consisted of an email sent to the entire group, and the provision of comments shared in an email or a tracked document. The Communications Agency then needed to reconcile all comments and seek approvals. To keep things moving, every HDT Comms Team member was responsible for engaging a back-up team member. Having the process in writing including how reviews and approvals would happen, and key contacts for each organization and who back-up reviewers would be in the case of people being out of office or unavailable would be helpful for future efforts.
- 3. Keep the team tight. Over time, a number of individuals from other parts of the overall HDT program began to join the standing HDT Comms Team weekly meetings. The meetings were supposed to be focused on communications to provide access to accurate information, but when the group grew to a certain size, the core communications tasks were sometimes waylaid by other concerns. Ultimately, the HDT Comms Teams meetings were diplomatically scaled down, allowing the agendas and conversations to stay focused.
- **4. Ensure Communications Team Members have access and are empowered.** Every member of the team does not need to be the decision-maker within the entity represented, but all need to have clear access to the decision-makers and need to be trustworthy sources about the communications work under way within an agency. The HDT Team was made up of individuals with a variety of seniority within their organizations, but each team member was empowered to fully represent their organization, and each was at the heart of the entity's communications work. This allowed the team to be available, be nimble, and have the ability to pivot very quickly when needed.
- **5. Clarify the need for discretion and be clear when information is ready to share.** Given the collaborative function of the team and the speed of a rapidly changing COVID-19 environment, team members were often sharing updates and information in real-time. While there was never malicious intent or a major faux pas, there were a few cases where information rightly shared among the communications professionals was shared outside of our team, and then used by others in ways that were awkward or premature. Formal recognition of the need for discretion, and clarity on what is actionable versus early information, would be advised for future efforts.
- **6. Local input is key.** The talented professionals at the agency could have created and executed a mass communications plan based on the up-to-the-minute and ever-evolving recommendations from the subject-matter expert epidemiologists. However, it would not have connected as deeply with our community without local input. Contributions from the local HDT Comms representatives influenced the nuance of the messaging to ensure it resonated with local students and community members. For example, as the creative shifted to include photography, the agency was planning to use stock photos. The local team members expressed the strong desire to feature local settings and people to deepen connections to Davis residents. With that in mind, they made suggestions for places that would be easily recognizable and connected with. A local photographer and videographer captured local





landmarks and people for the outreach campaign. Similarly, the local HDT Comms representatives were able to advise on details like school colors and popular places around town. This type of synergy occurred very regularly throughout the campaign.

# CONCLUSION

In summary, most entities participate in multi-jurisdictional communications efforts, and the lessons learned from the experiences of the Healthy Davis Together can benefit all such groups. The public health crisis of COVID-19 created more urgency, unexpected complications, and many challenges for the HDT Communications Team than most efforts, but, the intensity of the project highlighted the benefits of bringing together a team of professionals focused on collaboration, coordination, and success. We know our efforts succeeded in large part because every team member had the full support of their organization and the willingness to fully engage and participate.





**APPENDIX A: SAMPLE CREATIVE** 

# **Healthy Behaviors**



**Digital Banner** 





#### **Halloween Print Ad**





**Social Post** 

**2020 Olympic Themed Social Post** 

# **Testing**



#### **Bus Ad**





**Social Post** 

#### **Print Ad**



**Digital Banner** 



Video

# **Schools**



#### **Mobile Billboard**



**Social Post** 





**Poster** 



Video

**Flyer** 

# **Wastewater Monitoring**

# MONITORING WASTEWATER TO INFORM COVID-19 PUBLIC HEALTH RESPONSE

A guide to methods and lessons learned from Healthy Davis Together's experience in Davis, CA









# El alcantarillado nos puede dar mucha información sobre el COVID-19

Healthy Davis Together, un proyecto conjunto de UC Davis y la Ciudad de Davis, recoge y analiza muestras de aguas residuales de toda la ciudad tres veces por semana para detectar la presencia de SARS-CoV-2 (el virus que causa COVID-19) en nuestra comunidad.

A medida que la tasa de vacunación aumenta y los casos de COVID-19 disminuyen, el análisis periódico de las aguas residuales es una manera no invasiva de identificar tendencias y tomar medidas para proteger la salud de nuestra comunidad. No recogemos muestras ni datos de hogares individuales. El agua potable de la ciudad y de tu área sique siendo totalmente segura.

Se ha detectado SARS-CoV-2 en muestras de aguas residuales recogidas recientemente de este vecindario Esto indica que podris haber nuevas infecciones de COVID-19. Es importante seguir tomando medidas para prevenir la propagación.

#### Cuídate a ti y a tu familia:



Sigue las recomendaciones locales sobre el uso de la mascarilla y las reuniones.



Hazte la prueba si tienes síntomas del COVID-19 o si crees haber estado expuesto (aunque ya te hayas vacunado).



Sigue haciéndote la prueba si aún no te vacunaste contra el COVID-19.



Vacúnate si tienes 12 años o más.

Healthy Davis Together ofrece pruebas de saliva del COVID-19 gratuitas a todos los miembros de la comunidad en seis centros distintos. Puedes venir con o sin cita. Para hacer una cita, visita HealthyDavis Together.org/pruebas

Mondavi Center

523 Mrak Hall Drive Cada día: 8 am–5 pm

Marguerite Montgomery Elementary School

1441 Danbury Street L-V: 10:30 am-6:30 pm Davis Senior High School 315 West 14th Street

L–V: 8 am–4:15 pm Harper Junior High

Harper Junior High 4000 East Covell Blvd L–V: 8:30 am–4:15 pm Emerson Junior High

2121 Calaveras Avenue L=V: 7 am=2:15 pm

Davis Community Clinic

2051 John Jones Road L–J: consulta el horario en el sitio web

Para más información sobre Healthy Davis Together y para consultar los datos más recientes sobre aquas residuales, visita **HealthyDavisTogether.org/pruebas** 

Cuidémonos entre todos.



## **Playbook**

# Hannah Safford Environmental Engineering PhD Student Healthy Davis Together Wastewater Monitoring Team

**Video** 

# **Spanish Language Flyer**



**Healthy Davis Together** 

@HealthyDavis

Looking at wastewater testing data can help us determine COVID-19 infection trends in our community and encourage people to get tested when needed. The saliva-based testing is quick and free! Learn more at HealthyDavisTogether.org/water



119 views

# **Business**



# Thank you, Healthy Davis Together Business Partners.

Healthy Davis Together Business Partners have gone the extra mile during the COVID-19 pandemic to keep customers and employees safe and support the Davis community. Thank you to the 424 businesses that joined as partners. The program purchased more than \$480,000 in grift cards for program incentives and provided more than \$480,000 in grift cards for program incentives and provided more than \$480,000 in grift cards for program incentives and provided to public health guidelines. As more people get vaccinated and we start reclaiming our favorite moments, keep supporting the Davis businesses that worked hard to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Thank you again to all the business partners!

See the final list of participants at HealthyDavisTogether.org/partner









# Support Healthy Davis Together Business Partners

These businesses are working hard to create a safe environment for their employees—and for you, the customer. They're taking extra precautions, including frequently disinfecting and cleaning, enforcing social distancing and mask wearing, and encouraging employees to get tested twice a week. Cook for the decal in the window to support these Davis businessees.

Let's keep our community healthy. Learn more about the program, requirements businesses must meet, and a full list of participants at **HealthyDavisTogether.org/partners** 

#### Thank you to our newest business partners:

3rd Street Jewellers
Anderson Court
Anderson Court
Anderson Court
ADAUA Science
Bareford Yaga Studie
Bareford Yaga Studie
Bareford Yaga Studie
Bareford Yaga Studie
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Tim's Hawaiian BBQ Veterinary Information Net Village Bakery Working Body Chiropractic Y2K Nails & Spa Yi Tea Yolo Barre Yolo Crisis Nursery









#### **Social Post**



**Social Post** 

**Print Ad** 

**Print Ad** 



**Video** 

# **Vaccines**



#### **Billboard**



**Print Ad** 



### Video



**Social Posts** 



 ALSO TRUE Their symptoms are less severe.

HEALTHY YOLO TOGETHER