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WSU's Tara Nolen helps lead COVID-19 vaccine strategies at Hunter Health

By Paul Suellentrop

- Tara Nolen's passion is public health and she got her start in Wichita State's health programs and internships.
- She is community health manager at Hunter Health, where she is guiding efforts to vaccinate people during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Nolen said answering questions about the vaccine are key to efforts that make people comfortable with the shots.

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed public health into the forefront and Wichita State University graduates such as Tara Nolen are leading the effort.

“Working in public health – people don’t really know what we do,” Nolen said. “It shone a light on what public health is and activated us all. What I’m doing impacts patients and everybody every day.”



Nolen, a 2012 health services management and community development graduate, is community health manager at Hunter Health, which has three locations in Wichita. She oversees outreach programs and coordinates COVID-19 vaccines.

“This is what we do in public health - when there’s a crisis we try to work to stop it,” she said.

Nolen’s role is to plan and organize for Hunter Health, which was founded in 1976 to serve Native Americans and now offers affordable care to all members of Sedgwick County and surrounding communities. A typical day might include organizing volunteers or staff, updating technology to deal with demand and strategizing to reach patients.

“It’s an ever-changing game,” she said. “We have weekly planning meetings to try to determine the number of vaccines we have, how many patients we have coming into the clinic and whether or not we need to do something outside of clinic hours in order to reach more people.”

In March, the clinic held two major outreach clinics, one that vaccinated 510 people in one day and 720 the next. The first clinic targeted Native Americans; the second anyone 18 or over.

“We do a lot of assessing what’s going on in the state and what’s going on in the county to determine what populations we’re targeting,” she said. “It’s a lot of planning and coordinating across clinical and communications . . . having to coordinate all those aspects and make sure everybody knows what’s going on and who we’re serving.”

Nolen finds that the willingness of vaccine providers to answer questions from patients helps make them comfortable with the shots. Hunter Health vaccinates around 180 patients a day, in addition to its normal traffic. The clinic is also working to take vaccines to places such as homeless shelters.

“If they can have their questions answered from our providers, they are more likely to get it,” said Nolen, who holds a master’s degree in public health from the University of Kansas School of Medicine. “We have three time slots a day where we do the vaccinations. We’re adding staff to be able to increase that number more and take it off site, too.”

Nolen credits Wichita State’s public health program with nurturing her interest in public health, especially HIV and sexually transmitted infections prevention. She was president of HEALTH Student Association as a senior and worked as an intern in a tobacco-use prevention program through the Kansas Department of Health & Environment. That experience led to a job in that field. Nolen also works as an adjunct professor at the university.

“(Hunter Health) gave me an ability to work in that area,” she said. “Like a lot of areas, people that are under-served, people have a lot of different social determinants that are affecting their health in a lot of negative ways. I’m trying to organize things in a way that really does impact people’s health.”