August 17, 2020

This letter is written in support of the Community Counter project, a community-based initiative to promote engagement with COVID-19 contact tracing in the Orthodox Jewish community of Chicago and suburban Cook County.

Contact tracing, a central disease control measure employed by local and state health departments for decades, is a key strategy for preventing further spread of COVID-19. To be successful, contact tracing requires the full cooperation of residents throughout our state. IDPH seeks to partner with community-based initiatives that will assist in our efforts.

By working with faith-based initiatives, we hope to reach people who are at risk of infection but hesitant to talk with health officials. We need people who are trusted in communities across the state to let people who have been in close contact with a confirmed case know that they need to monitor their health and take steps to potentially prevent spread of the virus to their family, friends, co-workers, and other community members. This is how we will help prevent outbreaks and avoid the need to close or otherwise restrict houses of worship, schools, and businesses.

The particular strength of Community Counter is its clear and strong commitment to engaging members of the Orthodox Jewish community with local health departments. Collaboration of religious organizations and rabbinic leaders with civil public health authorities are essential for success in the Orthodox community. Outreach and educational messages also need to be framed in culturally and religiously relevant language. These are lessons we have learned from public health campaigns such as measles immunization and cancer screening. The Community Counter project applies these same principles in COVID-19 contact tracing, particularly after experience early in the pandemic when Orthodox enclaves in Chicago and New York were especially hard hit.

Another strength of the Community Counter project is that it tabulates the self-reported, completely anonymous cases that arise within the Orthodox community. This information is made available in transparent manner to the community. This feature facilitates recognition of increased transmission within the Orthodox community and allows for early action by institutional leaders.
The influence of religious or spiritual beliefs on health behaviors is not unique to the Orthodox Jewish community. We recognize that the Community Counter project could also serve as a model or template for use by other religious and ethnic enclaves.

Sincerely,

Ngozi Ezike, MD
Director