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In the summer of 2020, the City of Davis and the University of California, Davis (UC Davis), began what may be their most important joint project to date – the Healthy Davis Together initiative with the bold goal of preventing the spread of COVID-19 and facilitating the coordinated and gradual return to city activities and the reintegration of UC Davis students back into school and community life.

Funded by state and federal grants, major philanthropic donations and federal CARES Act resources, Healthy Davis Together (HDT) approached its goal with transparency, inclusion and strategy.

Healthy Davis Together is unique in that public and private partnerships were built into its core structure from the outset, fostering a holistic, community-centered approach that allows for greater consideration of social determinants of health as well as more expansive coordination and data-sharing across partners.

Prior to the creation of the HDT initiative, the University and City had never collaborated on a project of this nature or scale. The partnership evolved quickly due to the quick action of an early agreement that set aside existing conceptions of jurisdictional boundaries and initiated alignment on objectives and assigned responsibilities that best suited each entity. The City dedicated resources for staffing, secured locations for testing, navigated local and state paperwork, and tapped key connections and trusted messengers within the broader Davis population. The University brought leadership and public health expertise, provided scientific and clinical support critical to city-wide programs, and coordinated the needs of the large student body and university employees—who account for approximately one third of the Davis population when in session. The University also served a crucial early role in developing systems and practices as part of its “Campus Ready” program that would later be implemented in Davis, including saliva based COVID-19 testing, genomic sequencing, public health education and a student workforce.

Healthy Davis Together also extended quarantine and isolation support to community members and students who needed this level of support, including housing, food and salary support.

Another priority for UC Davis and the City of Davis was developing a vaccine outreach program targeted to underserved communities. HDT’s joint initiative partnered with trusted healthcare entities that serve vulnerable patient populations, set up a dedicated call center, provided ride-share transportation options to vaccination sites and piloted innovative outreach methods, such as door-to-door vaccinations.

Healthy Davis Together's impact on the community has been profound; its comprehensive COVID-19 response has been unique in the United States. From November 2020 through December 2021, Davis successfully reintegrated nearly 40,000 college students back into the community, re-opened K-12 schools full time, achieved an over 80% COVID-19 vaccination rate, drove an estimated 27% reduction in positive COVID-19 cases and a 61% reduction in deaths from COVID-19 during surge periods and maintained a COVID-19 case positivity rate averaging 71% lower than California's statewide rate. HDT's expansive partnerships helped it become a trusted and familiar presence in the community, which aided its core program goals and reduced the detrimental impact of misinformation and politicization surrounding COVID-19 public health guidance. Healthy Davis Together developed replicable and scalable public health strategies that have laid important groundwork in Davis and the surrounding county. The community's experience can serve as a model for future public health initiatives to develop decentralized, networked community efforts in an efficient and cohesive manner.

The success of HDT is also evident in and made possible by the partnerships established between UC Davis, the City of Davis, Yolo County, community partners, local businesses, the Davis Joint Unified School District, and others. These partnerships and the engagement of community stakeholders have strengthened the city's pandemic preparedness, resilience, and health infrastructure in ways that will last well beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. The HDT model has been recognized by the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities with its inaugural Research Response to a Community in Crisis Award. The City of Davis was awarded a 2021 Beacon Leadership and Innovation Award by the Institute for Local Government for efforts to implement collaborative, inclusive, and equitable programs that strengthen communities' resilience to crises.