

Green County (Michael Kuckes)

Managing Pharmacist/Partner at Monroe Hometown Pharmacy West (Monroe, WI)

The Wisconsin Community Health Empowerment Fund (WCHEF) and Communities Confronting COVID-19 (C3) teams interviewed Michael Kuckes via Zoom, a platform we are all too familiar with. As we sat for the interview in the comfort of our homes, the camera peered into Mike's office, depicting a bustling scene. Mike zipped across the room before rolling into the frame on his convenient mobile office chair, informing us that he only had 30 minutes for this interview, so we had to make it quick. The comment was not rude so much as matter-of-fact. This is how Mike's days always were: busy from start to finish.

Mike is the Managing Pharmacist and Partner at Monroe Hometown Pharmacy West, serving rural Monroe, Wisconsin, and the greater Green County community. In stark contrast to a local CVS or Walgreens in Madison, Mike's pharmacy frequently sees people with less access to health services. In addition to filling essential prescriptions, community members rely on Mike to tell them if that rash needs more than an oatmeal bath or which treatments are best for a child's runny nose. Mike knows, and he needs to know. As a rural health worker, he and his staff recognize pharmacists' unique role: connecting the community to resources that promote good health.

"Pharmacists have easy accessibility to the general public as a trusted resource for health education and trusted information," according to Mike. As a highly accessible health professional who is on the ground working with walk-in clients all day, the pharmacy and its staff have a unique level of local understanding, which allows them to build trust among community members. This high level of confidence and accessibility is what Mike attributes to his pharmacy and the greater local health system's success in reducing the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their community.

As a trusted community member and resource for health needs, Mike provides his clients with evidence-based education on COVID-19 vaccine options. He regularly engages in face-to-face conversations where he communicates the benefits and risks of vaccinations and addresses concerns with local patrons. According to Mike, this type of communication increases vaccine confidence, unlike some fear-mongering advertisements propagated at the pandemic's beginning.

Throughout the pharmacy's work, he has found that most people expected the vaccine process to be scary and traumatic, but in reality, clients are surprised at how simple and quick the process is. By sharing the simple approach and testimonials from trusted community members who received the vaccines and boosters, Mike has impacted more local lives than any multi-million-dollar advertising campaign could.

For busy people with demanding work schedules that are all too familiar in rural Wisconsin, the only effective way to communicate a message is to be straight to the point, with no dancing around the subject and no loopholes around the nitty-gritty. Mike is not trying to pull a fast one,

and his patrons know that, which is why he could barely squeeze in this interview around back-to-back vaccine appointments. Pharmacists like him want to keep their neighborhoods safe and healthy. Mike is doing this by scheduling quick vaccinations, conducting onsite clinics at schools and worksites, and sharing easy-to-understand vaccination information with community members. **By emphasizing simplicity and efficiency in the process and meeting people where they are, Mike has helped thousands decide to protect themselves, their family, and their community by getting vaccinated against COVID-19.**