



OPTIMIZING EQUITY IN COVID-19 Vaccine Education and Adoption

by

Healthy Communities Immersion Team 2021

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Introduction

What makes a community healthy? Our immersion team learned that health outcomes are determined by far more than access to healthcare. Health is complex - it is also a product of your environment, socioeconomic factors, and behaviors. Our group set out to tackle this topic by narrowing our focus to a single, current, actionable, and dominant component that we believe is a crucial contributor to improving communities' health in Richmond, VA. You guessed it- COVID-19 vaccinations.

Our Journey

To narrow this broad topic of healthy communities, our immersion team met with local public health leaders to learn more about the pressing issues impacting the health of the greater Richmond area and the practical steps we can take to improve outcomes and lives. We learned that a healthy community does not exist solely based on the quality of its healthcare system but based on social and economic determinants of health. COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted low-income and communities of color, lacking these resources. How can we work together with key community stakeholders - and YOU - to drive change and improve outcomes for individuals and communities?

Findings

We chose to take what we learned about healthy communities and apply them to the current hot topic facing public health locally and globally: Equity in COVID-19 vaccinations. Using the feedback from our interviews and the data available from COVID-19 trends, we identified our problem statement:

COVID-19 has highlighted existing racial disparities in health outcomes and disproportionately impacted communities of color. The initial rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine failed to address racial inequality adequately. How can the Richmond region educate its most vulnerable populations so that each individual is prepared to make an informed decision when he or she has the opportunity to be vaccinated?

By applying the CDC's Community Health Improvement framework to tackle this problem, our team aims to make meaningful recommendations to improve awareness and outreach to Richmond's most vulnerable communities even beyond the pandemic response.

- **WHAT** - The data clarifies that COVID-19 disproportionately impacted communities of color and highlighted existing disparities in health outcomes. Both Black and Hispanic/Latino people are more likely to be hospitalized and die from COVID-19 than white, non-Hispanic people. The comparison data of COVID-19 impact vs. vaccine distribution shows a similar story. In Richmond, 48% of COVID-19 cases, 65% of hospitalization, and 59% of deaths were in the Black community, but less than 29% of vaccines administered were to this population.
- **WHERE** - We see similar trends with location - we are failing to focus on areas of greatest need. Maps show a lack of alignment with COVID-19 case impact and vaccine distribution in the Richmond region and the Commonwealth.
- **WHY** - Why is there a disconnect between COVID-19 impact and vaccine outreach? Health is complex and history matters. Surveys by the Kaiser Family Foundation showed that Black and Hispanic populations have the most vaccine hesitancy. But there's hope for change! As time passes, vaccine sentiment is improving, and more people of all demographics express interest in getting vaccinated.
- **HOW** - How can we collaborate with others to maximize efforts? We held additional interviews with public and community health leaders who have been instrumental in COVID-19 response and vaccine rollout. We learned more about barriers to access, vaccine hesitancy, and effective communication.

Recommendations

As we work together to bring awareness to COVID vaccine hesitancy and foster informed decision making, key considerations must include outreach and messaging, access, education, prioritization, safety, data, and most importantly, trust. All interviews expressed the importance of leveraging trusted community leaders to help influence and lead grassroots efforts.

LMR alums and other trusted community members can drive informed decision making and promote vaccine access in the communities we influence by getting educated, sharing fact-based information, volunteering, and advocating.

Fostering healthy communities and successfully improving access to services for COVID-19 vaccines and beyond will require an approach that addresses systemic change on multiple levels, including:

1. Addressing racial disparity as a root cause
2. Removing barriers to access
3. Improving infrastructure
4. Being culturally responsive
5. Leading by trusted community members

Many health inequities existed before 2020, but COVID-19 brought them into the spotlight. Let's use the lessons learned from the last year to improve systems and policies and let's work together to create healthier communities in the future.

Interviews

- Dr. Danny Avula, Deputy Director for Henrico County and Richmond City Health Districts, Coordinator of Virginia State Vaccination
- Julie Scott Bilodeau, CEO, Crossover Ministries
- Beth Bortz, President and CEO, Virginia Center for Health Innovation
- Dr. Gabriella Caldwell-Miller, Division Director for Behavioral Health and Wellness, Hanover County
- Naomi Davis and Becky Clay-Christensen, Program Coordinator, Congregational Health and Executive Director, Community Health, Bon Secours Richmond Health System
- Rebecca Epstein, Program Manager, Immunize Virginia, Institute for Public Health Innovation
- Sheryl Garland, Torey Edmonds, and Danny Weissman, Chief of Health Impact, Healthy Communities Outreach Coordinator, and Senior Project Manager, COVID-19 Latino/Hispanic Work Group, VCU Health System
- Tanya Gonzalez, Executive Director, Sacred Heart Center
- Alaysia Black Jackett and Mona Siddiqui, Deputy Chief Diversity Officer and Deputy Chief Diversity Office/ Senior Policy Advisory for the Office of New Americans
- Jackie Lawrence and Margo Webb, Director of Health Equity, Richmond and Henrico County Health Departments
- Angie Phelon, Business Development Director, Senior Connections
- Albert Walker, Director for Health Equity and Community Engagement, Richmond Memorial Health Foundation

Resources

- Center for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC Community Health Improvement Navigator: <https://www.cdc.gov/chinav/index.html>
- Kaiser Family Foundation, Coronavirus, COVID-19, Vaccine Monitor: January 2021: <https://www.kff.org/report-section/kff-covid-19-vaccine-monitor-january-2021-vaccine-hesitancy/>
- Virginia Department of Health, Coronavirus, COVID-19 Cases & Testing and Vaccine Dashboards: <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/covid-19-in-virginia/>