

Health Equity Hearing Written Testimony

Panel #16 Housing = Health and Housing Stability

Organization Housing = Health

Topic: Equity Considerations for the COVID-19 Vaccine Roll-Out

I am a first-year medical student, and this past month I have been learning about the history of medicine in the United States. One of my greatest takeaways from this course is that American medicine was founded on the exploitation of people of color and that this legacy has transcended into our current healthcare system. Evans et al. expressed this poignantly when they discussed how the bodies of the marginalized served as the “clinical material that permitted the expansion of medical research, improvement of medical care and enhancement of medical training.”¹

These atrocities were systematic and intentional. Correspondingly, contemporary health initiatives must be equally fervent and multi-faceted. As your office plans on how to best distribute the COVID-19 vaccine, I recommend you keep two things in mind. The first is that building infrastructure that works for you (as well-connected individuals) is insufficient. In fact, this may widen existing disparities as exemplified by NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital’s recent vaccination campaign.² If you notice that certain communities are not showing up to get vaccinated, do not assume that it is because of their cultural or behavioral dispositions. Marginalized individuals often face structural and financial barriers to accessing care. As Paul Farmer wrote, “those least likely to comply are those least able to comply.”³ For this reason, it is important to interrogate obstacles that might hinder someone from getting vaccinated:

- Are communities well informed about the benefits and risks of the vaccine?
- Have partnerships with community organizations been formalized? And are they facilitating the outreach and communication efforts?
- Are vaccinations free? Is that information transparent?
- Has key information like vaccination locations, days, and hours been widely disseminated such that individuals without reliable internet access are reached (e.g. radio, TV, PSA from community leaders)?
- Will vaccination sites be in each community, and will these sites be directly accessible by public transit?
- Will the hours be expansive to accommodate the schedules of both working and non-work adults?
- Will the sites be staffed by people well versed in science communication?
- Will people with mobility issues receive home visits to administer the vaccine?
- What follow up mechanisms will be used to ensure that people know when to come back in for their second shot?

The second is that the fight against COVID extends beyond vaccination distribution. Many of the issues that predisposed communities of color to disproportionate COVID impacts will still exist as the vaccine roll-out goes on. Consequently, resources to address these challenges should be distributed as people come to your testing and vaccination sites:

- PPE such as masks and hand sanitizer
- Vouchers for food and transport

¹ Evans MK, Rosenbaum L, Malina D, Morrissey S, Rubin EJ. Diagnosing and Treating Systemic Racism. *The New England Journal of Medicine*. 2020;383(3):274-276. DOI: 10.1056/NEJMe2021693

² Ellis NT. A Vaccination Site Meant to Serve a Hard-Hit Latino Neighborhood in New York Instead Served More Whites from Other Areas. *CNN*. 2021. Accessed January 31, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/30/us/new-york-vaccine-disparities/index.html>.

³ Farmer P. Social Scientists and the New Tuberculosis. *Social Science & Medicine*. 1997; 44(3):347-358. DOI: 10.1016/S0277-9536(96)00143-8

- Consultations with social workers to connect people with food, housing, and health resources

If we are to learn anything from this dreadful pandemic, it should be that no public health crisis impacts people equally. If anything, they exacerbate the inequities already existent in society. Tackling the COVID-19 vaccination effort in an equitable manner will require tremendous outreach, dialogue, and resource allocation. However, a future in which we can all live mask-free without the fear of transmission will make the effort well worth it. And hopefully, this will become the start of the healthcare system's reconciliation with people of color.

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