



Community Health Centers and the COVID-19 Vaccination Effort

Health centers have a proud history of fulfilling their mission, built upon a foundation of trust, dignity and respect for their patients, partners, and communities. Health centers can play a key part of the nation's COVID-19 vaccination strategy, but only if we can do so without risking our trust and credibility with our patients, many of whom belong to populations with a historical basis for skepticism about government vaccination programs. With a safe and scientifically sound vaccine and an equitable distribution plan, health centers stand ready to assist.

Community Health Centers Stand Ready to Fight the Long Game Against COVID

- Health centers have more than 50,000 nurses, medical assistants, and outreach staff to administer the COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available, in addition to an existing distribution chain among health centers.
- To vaccinate all current health center patients and staff, an estimated 60 million doses of COVID vaccine would be necessary. More doses would be needed to vaccinate additional community residents.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) guidance for COVID-19 Vaccination Program identifies health centers as expected to administer the vaccine because their patient populations are at increased risk for virus.
- Among critical populations health centers serve are the following: 14.5 million people in poverty, 2.9 million people 65 and older, 19 million people who are of minority background, 1.5 million homeless people, 20 million people with chronic conditions, and millions of America's essential workers – those who harvest our food in the field, clean public spaces, and work in our factories.
- As a trusted community health resource, health centers have the longstanding relationships on the ground with patients and the broader community – and are counted on to provide accurate information and guidelines about staying safe and protecting others during a pandemic. The highest priority is keeping patients and staff safe.
- Health centers can modify operations to adapt to new health challenges like the pandemic. Health centers are always adapting workflow models to meet the challenges of the pandemic to better meet the ongoing needs of their patients. Indeed, in a matter of weeks they radically changed how they practice medicine in response to COVID. In preparing for the COVID vaccine they are assessing what response strategies will work best.

- Health centers are part of the solution in addressing vaccine hesitancy. Immunizations are a very important part of primary care prevention. Health centers have a long and solid history of optimizing immunization coverage in at-risk populations. They partner closely with public health, community partners, pharmacists, dental providers, and others to ensure their patients and their communities are immunized.
- During the 2020-21 flu season, health centers are working with state and community partners on vigorous flu vaccination activities while maintaining appropriate COVID-19 safety protocols. Yet full flu vaccine coverage of adults remains a daunting challenge.
- Obtaining, managing, and administering the 2020 flu vaccine is an excellent precursor for the COVID vaccine when it becomes available to health centers. Administering flu vaccines can be used to check and test policies, procedures, and workflows.

Biggest COVID-19 Challenges Facing Community Health Centers

The general sense is that the biggest challenges for a COVID-19 vaccine involve the following factors:

- Lack of transparency
- Science is still evolving
- Coordination of public health
- Distribution and infrastructure planning around such areas as storage, dosing, and supply needs. For instance:
 - Clear guidelines on vaccine dosing need to be established.
 - Help with vaccine storage and cold chain technology management.
 - Human resource needs for the release of vaccines to health center sites.
 - Management of supply needs (syringes, needles, documentation tools such as tablets, and protective gear for workers).

While health centers stand ready to administer COVID vaccines, they must work with local and state health departments to be pre-screened, invited, credentialed, trained, and accepted into the COVID-19 Provider Enrollment and Ordering Management System to be eligible to receive vaccine allocations.

Community Health Centers Need Support to Address Vaccine Challenges

- While it is difficult to know the true costs to health centers of acquiring, storing, and administering a new two-dose vaccine given the many details still to be determined by manufacturers and national, state, and local officials, NACHC has generated a preliminary estimate of the cost to health centers to be at least \$2.73 billion. This estimate factors in the total number of health center staff and their patients and is based on the current Medicare COVID-19 vaccine payment rate (\$45.33 total for both doses).
- Other potential costs include needed PPE, distribution and storage, patient outreach and education, injection supplies, additional staffing, and services that remove patient access barriers such as transportation and translation.

- Protecting health center workers on the front lines is also a vital concern as 22,751 health center staff have already been infected by the virus.
- Given the range of costs associated with vaccinating critical populations, federal funding supporting pandemic response should be flexible in how it can be used. We are especially concerned about health center patients in urban, rural, and frontier communities who typically face significant barriers to care, which is particularly problematic for vaccines requiring two different clinical visits. Moreover, these same communities are more likely to be distrustful of the safety of any new or government administered vaccine.
- Health centers have experienced a multitude of problems associated with disruption caused by COVID-19. These include a reduction in patient appointments, canceled scheduled vaccines, decreased revenue, break in continuity of care for chronic conditions (i.e., diabetes, hypertension, heart failure, asthma, depression, substance use), lack of sustained funding, and drops in vaccination coverage.

Community Health Centers Value Transparency and Equity in Vaccine Education and Outreach

- Health centers also have a proud history of fulfilling their mission, built upon a foundation of trust, dignity and respect with their patients, partners, and communities.
- A key challenge that health centers are aware of, and are trying to address in local communities, is vaccine hesitancy for both providers and patients, as the science is not transparent and access to vaccines remains opaque.
- We need culturally responsible messaging for patients, providers, and care teams around the following key issues: safety, access, quality, cost, and timeliness.

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