



The Community Health Center Vaccination Program

In the fight against COVID-19, the Community Health Center mission of advancing equity in the nation's pandemic response is now more critical than ever. Health centers have been on the ground in force for nearly a year, fighting the spread of the virus in hard-to-reach communities, including communities of color and among special populations – the elderly, homeless and agricultural workers. They have tested, vaccinated, diverted non-acute cases from overwhelmed hospitals, connected affected patients with housing, food and critical services. Today, they are proud to be a catalyst in the national effort to get everyone vaccinated and bring an end to the pandemic.

Community Health Centers Are Seasoned Fighters Against COVID

- Serving more than 30 million Americans, Community Health Centers continue to play a unique and critically important role in helping to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in underserved communities. Health centers have more than 50,000 nurses, medical assistants and outreach staff to administer the COVID-19 vaccine and are out in force getting shots in the arms to their own staff and the medically underserved.
- Health centers are resilient after nearly one year of testing and caring for populations hard hit by COVID-19. Our patients include 14.5 million people living in poverty, 2.9 million people 65 and older, 19 million people who are racial or ethnic minorities, 1.5 million homeless people, millions of 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 our patients and staff safe – because until all of us are safe, none of us are.
- Health centers are part of the solution for addressing vaccine hesitancy. Immunizations are a very important part of primary care prevention and 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.

Community Health Centers Are Drivers of Health Equity

- Every person should have fair and equitable access to a COVID-19 vaccine through a trusted health care provider. Community Health Centers are a lifeline in underserved communities. They have the tools and established trust to vaccinate the special populations who may be harder to reach, but who stand to benefit most.
- Understanding the social determinants of health among special populations is essential to achieving an equitable vaccine effort. Health centers know the patients who may lack regular access to housing, food or mental health services and can navigate these challenges with outreach, support services and communications. Because COVID vaccinations require two doses, the traditional health center patient-centered approach of consistent and coordinated care allows providers to focus on the support services needed to secure vaccine coverage and build vaccine confidence, even in times of chaos and disruption.
- Health centers in the state work with other trusted brokers (churches, civic groups, community organizations) on distribution to build vaccine confidences and address hesitancy in at-risk populations and counter misinformation through appropriate outreach channels.
- There are currently two COVID vaccines that an individual health center may receive and another one-dose vaccine may be in circulation soon. It is important that our patient population know that ALL vaccines tested and approved for use will prevent death from COVID-19.

Health Center Challenges in Preparing for a National COVID Vaccine Strategy

- Health centers need predictability in individual vaccine supplies to ensure vaccine doses are getting to prioritized patients. Direct allocations will help with the logistical challenges to pre-plan distribution and prevent any waste.
- Individuals in rural communities face a lack of transportation to access vaccine sites in addition to the challenge of trying to make appointments online in communities that do not have access to broadband. Too many rural communities are still Internet deserts with no connectivity, no equipment to access online reservation systems or individuals who do not understand how to make the appointment.
- Health centers need an improved system that easily accepts and integrates data. The VAMS system makes timely vaccine data collection and reporting difficult to track and measure progress.
- Health centers need tools and resources they need to do their part – including adequate reimbursement to administer vaccines. The COVID-19 vaccine's short shelf life requires health centers to strategically schedule appointments, perform additional outreach for both doses and dedicate staff for patient monitoring and health center reimbursement rates must account for increased workforce support to get the job done.
- We are hopeful that Congress will soon be sending additional resources. The \$7.6 billion in funding designated for health centers in the American Rescue Plan is sorely needed to respond to the challenges on the ground. We are appreciative that the funding is intended to be flexible

so that health centers can utilize the funds for the most pressing issue before them. The funding to expand the health care workforce – through the National Health Service Corps, the Nurse Corps, the Teaching Health Center Graduate Medical Education – and the investments in Medicaid are also incredibly important and needed.