



The Health Center COVID Vaccination Program is a Success Story in Health Equity

From the start, equity has been the North Star of the Biden Administration’s national vaccine strategy and Community Health Centers have played a central role protecting populations who disproportionately suffered higher rates of infection from COVID-19. The program, launched by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), has been a success, resulting in higher rates of COVID vaccination among special populations.

The Community Health Center COVID Vaccination Program was stood up in just two weeks – unprecedented in the history of the program. At the same time, health centers never stopped delivering key preventive and primary health care services.

COVID exposed the glaring divide of health disparities among racial and ethnic minorities, who suffered higher rates of infection and death. Health centers have helped narrow that divide by taking the shots to where the people are, providing 19.2 million COVID-19 vaccinations, with over two in three shots at a health center administered to people of color.

The COVID vaccination program is aligned with the health center mission. Approximately 91% of health center patients have low incomes and more than half -- 58 percent -- are members of a racial or ethnic minority group. Over half of health centers’ 14,500 delivery sites are located in rural communities.

The Community Health Center COVID Vaccination program is saving lives and preventing the spread of COVID-19 in traditionally marginalized communities. In areas where Community Health Centers are located, there are lower rates of COVID infection and death, according to a joint report from the Morehouse School of Medicine and NACHC. [View “Health Centers Fighting COVID-19” for details.](#)

A key study [led by Boston University School of Public Health and published in JAMA](#) underscored that health centers have been instrumental in boosting COVID-19 vaccination rates across the U.S. among underserved and minority populations. Researchers found that, as of July 2021, health centers administered 61.4 percent of their vaccines to people of color, compared to 40 percent of vaccines administered to racial and ethnic groups in the general population.

Health centers are growing their role in the nation’s pandemic response efforts (in addition to state and local efforts) and have been important players in coordinating response efforts quickly and more equitably, according to a [Kaiser Family Foundation Issue Brief](#): “Taken together, health centers’ federal partnership programs to administer vaccinations, distribute self-test kits, provide free N95 masks (in the coming weeks), and eventually prescribe and distribute oral antivirals should strengthen health centers’ ability to help prevent, detect, and treat COVID-19 in underserved communities.”

Challenges

More than two years of fighting the pandemic have exacted a toll: chronic workforce shortages are worsening due to problems that include exhaustion, trauma, COVID infections and recruitment challenges. Nearly half – 44 percent of health centers – report they do not have adequate staff to administer vaccines as of January 2022.

Health centers are not adequately reimbursed for testing and vaccine administration and counseling to build vaccine confidence.

Resources Needed

Health centers need secure funding to build the primary care workforce and infrastructure capacity to meet the demand for affordable health services now and beyond the pandemic.

Chronic illnesses, such as long-haul COVID, mental illness and substance use disorders are on the rise. Some 8.5 million new health center patients will need care over the next four years.

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