Community Partners Offer Key Insights to Health Departments for Increasing Vaccine Confidence

Vaccines are considered among the most significant public health achievements of the 20th century. They play a critical role in keeping individuals and communities healthy by providing immunity against potentially dangerous diseases. During the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccine hesitancy has increased as a result of misinformation and disinformation spreading across social and traditional media platforms, targeting vulnerable and underserved communities, and further stalling vaccine uptake.

On June 28 and 29, ASTHO hosted a meeting with representatives from faith-based organizations (FBO), community-based organizations (CBO), universities and colleges, healthcare systems, and other stakeholder groups. While considering how state and territorial health agencies can better collaborate with community partners to strengthen vaccine confidence, participants also discussed the drivers of misinformation and disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how public health can move forward to address vaccine hesitancy. Below are actions health departments could take to improve collaboration efforts with community partners.

Improving Community Partnerships Can Reduce Vaccine Hesitancy

Build Trust

➢ **Identify and partner with trusted community members.** Identify messengers that reflect the target audience's demographic makeup, including faith and community leaders, healthcare providers, and social media influencers. While not every community leader will want to serve as a messenger, some will offer to provide a venue to share the message.

➢ **Acknowledge racism and health inequities exist.** Recognize where the disparities are and take appropriate steps to combat them.

➢ **Involve vulnerable communities.** When connecting with vulnerable groups, make sure they are included in all stages of the information campaign, from development to execution.

➢ **Invest in non-traditional partners.** Identify and connect with existing and new community partners from a variety of sectors and continue to engage those partners throughout the year.

➢ **Develop consistent messaging.** Ensure messages from government, healthcare, and public health agencies are consistent and based on fact. Mixed messages from different sources makes it difficult for the public to know who to trust.

Enhance Communication Efforts

➢ **Diversify outreach**. Utilize social and traditional media as well as in-person events to reach people who don't have internet access.

➢ **Increase social media presence across a variety of platforms, both traditional and non-traditional.** Public health and medical experts can share good information where their audiences find misinformation. Messages should be shared on popular platforms such as Tik Tok, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram.

➢ **Tailor messages for specific communities.** Work with community partners to better understand motivations, beliefs, and values that influence vaccine hesitancy in their respective communities and use this information to develop personalized messaging.

➢ **Collect positive testimonies from those who have received the vaccine.** Encourage community leaders to share their own positive vaccination experiences, and to receive their vaccines during public events or post videos of their vaccination on their website or social media channels.

➢ **Break down the science.** Make sure information is shared at a level that is understandable, respectful, non-judgmental, and culturally and linguistically appropriate for the target community.
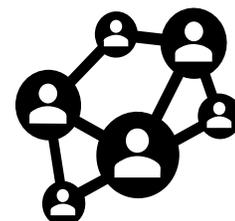
Implement Policies that Support Collaboration

➢ **Use data to develop evidenced-based policies.** Evaluate the impact of communication campaigns to understand what messages and messengers work for which communities and share this information widely. Use the data to inform policies around vaccine access, communication, and reporting.

➢ **Build off existing data to develop a more holistic understanding of vaccine uptake.** Develop policies that encourage data sharing between public health, healthcare, and community partners. Leverage existing clinical resources and make data collection and reporting requirements simple.

➢ **Compensate those who give their time and energy**. Identify funding for community partners or offer information or resources. Consider including them as a line item in state budgets.

➢ **Integrate health equity into policies.** Weave health equity into the policymaking processes, not as a separate item.

Looking Ahead

Public health should continue to strengthen and expand relationships with FBOs, CBOs, social media influencers, and others to develop and promote good information. Messages should be personalized for members of the community. Additionally, public health agencies should concentrate efforts on finding the right messenger, just as much as finding the right message. Finally, sustaining partnerships between health departments and community partners beyond the pandemic, will require long-term, predictable funding and integrating health equity into programs and policies.

For Additional Information, please see Implementation Tools for Health Departments and Addressing Misinformation