

CASE STUDY:

AUGUST 2023

Vaccine Communications: Community Partners & Outreach Strategies

North Carolina has built an exemplary communications infrastructure and campaign to fight COVID-19 with the goal of providing equitable vaccine access to historically marginalized populations. The campaign reached its goal of closing health equity gaps in vaccination rates, ending with no gap between Whites and Hispanics and a 3% gap between White and Black North Carolinians, with no gap in some age groups. This success is in no small part due to the strength of the community partnerships that NCDHHS developed throughout the pandemic. Paired with NCDHHS' commitment to operational excellence, engaging strategic partners and equipping them to become trusted voices to encourage safe and effective COVID-19 vaccination was a cornerstone of the communications outreach strategy.

While vaccination hesitancy was prevalent across demographic groups due to the speed of vaccine development, Blacks/African Americans, Hispanics and American Indians had ample reason to distrust the public health system that has historically exploited their community members. All North Carolinians needed more information to make informed decisions. Historically marginalized populations needed respect and assurance in addition.

We enlisted the support of community leaders and invested heavily in on-the-ground organizing and communications to help break down barriers to vaccination. Key to the success of this effort was valuing and resourcing the talent and expertise of advocates and influencers within historically marginalized populations. They became the eyes, ears, arms, legs and driving force of the vaccination effort, telling us what they needed, where they needed it and how we could be most effective together. Their partnership with NCDHHS saved thousands of lives.

This network of diverse community partners had to be built across the state by linking isolated community influencers and community-based organizations. They lent their networks to NCDHHS, quickly providing a wide and deep grassroots public health communications and fulfillment network. This allowed us to address both physical and emotional barriers to health. Our partners helped us identify, address and overcome significant barriers to vaccination, such as lack of transportation, lack of childcare and not being able to afford time off of work. The solutions worked for communities because they were developed with them. Child care was offered. Prepaid gift cards were given to offset the expense of time off work. Gift cards were also given to those who drove friends and family to vaccination sites.





NCDHHS built this network by working with existing groups and forming new ones. For instance, the department established an Advisory Committee that was instrumental in providing input, feedback and guidance that reflected diverse communities and stakeholders throughout the state. We also formed a special COVID-19 Vaccine Communication Advisory Committee to guide our communications work and help make sure it was culturally aligned to our target audiences. NCDHHS also held regular meetings with the existing Historically Marginalized Populations Group and the Teen Advisory Council. A NC Counts Coalition organization, Healthier Together, galvanized community-based organizations across the state and was a key partner, with the communications team providing print materials, newsletters and updates to support vaccine outreach. Additionally, the COVID-19 vaccines communication team established monthly meetings with Local Health Department Public Information Officers as a way to strengthen our communication coordination. These continued meetings provided a space to share ideas and solicit feedback, as well as learn from and serve our stakeholder groups and their partners.

We proactively sought input from various partners in communities across North Carolina to better understand the kinds of communications materials that would have the most impact. As a result, we were able to develop culturally aligned communications for historically marginalized populations, including Black/African American, Hispanic, American Indian and rural populations. We developed materials in both English and Spanish and made them available for download or shipped them directly to partners across the state. Over 1,000 organizations across the state requested bilingual thematic campaign materials to encourage COVID-19 vaccination.

To maximize the potential of our vast communications network, we developed a Customer Relationship Management system through the HubSpot platform. This allowed the team to coordinate the 4,450 COVID-19 vaccine partners, track numerous interactions, provide an accurate picture of engagements across the state and directly link events and expenditures to local vaccination rates.

In the end, community-based organizations and stakeholders, local public health organizations, religious leaders and medical providers around the state joined with NCDHHS in a unified effort to build trust and encourage COVID-19 vaccination across the state. The communications campaign provided them with a unified message that was continually updated with new themes and messages as the pandemic and public health needs evolved.

Thematic Campaigns Keep Pace with a Rapidly Changing Pandemic

We had one central message but numerous thematic campaigns to provide fresh materials and content for our community partners. Each campaign came with easily downloadable video, print and social media materials, all of which were aligned with the broader NCDHHS media strategy.

Seeing a way to help our partners close longstanding health disparities, the materials promoted the availability of other vaccines, such as flu, and encouraged routine physicals to ensure that people stayed healthy and strong during the pandemic.

We developed and implemented five successful thematic campaigns through the course of the pandemic:

 <p>BRING SUMMER BACK GET VACCINATED.</p> <p>Find your COVID-19 vaccine MySpot.nc.gov</p> <p>SPOT. SHOT.</p>	 <p>Get the BOOST you need</p> <p>Spring into a healthier summer. Get vaccinated and boosted.</p>	 <p>KNOW Before YOU GO BACK TO SCHOOL</p> <p>Staying up to date on COVID-19 vaccines and boosters helps kids stay protected and in school.</p>	 <p>KNOW Before YOU GO TO FAMILY GATHERINGS</p> <p>THE HOLIDAYS CAN FEEL LIKE HOME Again</p> <p>BOOST YOUR AND YOUR FAMILY'S COVID-19 PROTECTION THIS SEASON.</p> <p>HEALTHIER TOGETHER</p>	 <p>Life is Calling</p> <p>Don't let COVID-19 get in the way.</p>
<p>Bringing Summer Back</p>	<p>Spring Into Summer</p>	<p>Know Before You Go: Back to School</p>	<p>Know Before You Go to Winter Holidays</p>	<p>Life is Calling</p>
<p>REGISTRATION: 350</p>	<p>REGISTRATION: 350</p>	<p>REGISTRATION: 300</p>	<p>REGISTRATION: 215</p>	<p>REGISTRATION: 300</p>
<p>ESTIMATED REACH: 1,500,000</p>	<p>ESTIMATED REACH: 600,000</p>	<p>ESTIMATED REACH: 550,000</p>	<p>ESTIMATED REACH: 375,000</p>	<p>ESTIMATED REACH: 500,000</p>

Lessons Learned: Building Community Partnerships Pay Off in Public Health

A pandemic that affects everyone needs everyone to fight it. Community partnerships are the glue that unites a fragmented health care system and supports isolated and underserved communities. Here are some ways to build successful community partnerships:

- **Effective campaigns grow from community roots.** Start with your existing relationships and make sure to continue to nurture and invest in them so they are there when you need them most. Then enlist organizations who can help you develop deeper relationships in the communities that you need to grow the most.
- **Have honest conversations that can be uncomfortable.** Make sure you are a true partner with your stakeholders. Do the hard work by listening, collaborating and being honest about what you can and cannot do in the partnership.

- **Don't ask partners to carry your water; ask them how you can help carry theirs.** Many organizations have dealt with and solved critical health problems on the ground with few resources. Trust them to understand how to best serve their communities and learn from their years serving the public. Make their needs a part of your strategy and give them the resources they need to be successful.
- **Show partners that their work is making a difference.** Let's not forget the darkness of the days during the pandemic and how often it felt hopeless, especially to historically marginalized populations who initially experienced the highest rates of fatalities. Everyone is working under great personal and professional stress and, in the thick of it, they often feel exhausted. It is worth the time and investment to celebrate incremental gains with community partners and stakeholders.
- **Don't forget about the people who made it possible.** Even though the pandemic is over, you still need to maintain the relationships that you built to fight COVID-19. The pandemic exposed large health disparities that are still to be addressed. Continue to work with community partners to solve big problems.

The Neimand Collaborative produced a series of case studies capturing best practices and lessons learned in outreach efforts to support COVID-19 vaccination. Case studies address telephone outreach, lessons learned during COVID-19 vaccine communications, data-focused decisions, Spanish-language outreach and community partnerships. All of the case studies can be found at www.neimandcollaborative.com.