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Community groups rally for vaccine education, distribution

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Michelle McGough carried a handful of gift cards around a park in South Scranton earlier this month.

The offer was simple: Get the COVID-19 vaccine from a nearby tent and receive a \$25 gift card to Gerrity's, Amazon, American Eagle or Old Navy.

McGough, a volunteer from the Kick COVID-19 Community Corps, approached families at the back-to-school fair. Most parents had already received the vaccine. She and other volunteers will keep asking until everyone in Lackawanna County has a convenient, informed opportunity to become vaccinated.

Those efforts could soon mean door-to-door visits in neighborhoods with the greatest vaccine hesitancy, seeking ways to motivate teenagers and young adults to vaccinate and more mobile vaccine distribution for people without transportation.

The work of the Kick COVID-19 Community Corps stems from a conversation of a few community volunteers wondering how to best provide people, especially the most vulnerable populations, with factual information about vaccines and where to obtain them.

Three dozen Lackawanna County groups and agencies — including governments, faith groups and medical providers — have come together to educate the public and help provide thousands of vaccines. The group has now turned its focus on getting the vaccine into neighborhoods and making it as convenient as possible for people to receive it.

“It’s wonderful to be able to help in the community and to be able to work with such amazing people,” said Jennifer Cawley, one of the group’s organizers. “We just have people coming out from all over. They’re not letting politics or personalities get in the way. They are just wanting to support our efforts.”

Focusing efforts

As of Friday, 61.4% of total residents in Lackawanna County are fully vaccinated, including 91.6% of residents ages 65 and older, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. Of the 67 counties in Pennsylvania, Lackawanna ranks ninth in the number of residents ages 12 and older — 80.5% — to receive at least one dose.

Knowing that large-scale vaccine clinics, where thousands of people received vaccines this spring are no longer well-attended, the community corps shifted its focus. The Institute for Public Policy and Economic Development, with offices in both Wilkes-Barre and Scranton, has helped the group know where to look.

Staff developed maps showing the share of potentially unvaccinated people at a census-tract level, which includes a smaller scale than by municipality or by ZIP code. Using national survey data from the Kaiser Family Foundation on how various social groups reported their vaccine status/intention, the institute highlighted areas where the Community Corps could have the most success not just finding people who had not received the vaccine, but who are also willing to do so.

Based on the work of the Institute, a higher share of people would likely say they will “definitely not” be vaccinated in the most rural parts of the county, and a relatively larger share of the more persuadable “wait and see” group live in the city.

Over the last few weeks, the Community Corps set up tents at back-to-school fairs in Scranton neighborhoods, promoted a vaccine clinic at Scranton High School and continued to distribute information as the more contagious delta variant spreads.

Some of the work in coming weeks and months will be in the city's poorest neighborhoods, where daily struggles of food and shelter often take priority.

"We are going to do our due diligence, to make it as convenient as possible," said Jason Kavulich, the director of Lackawanna County's Area Agency on Aging.

Making connections

As McGough and Cawley spoke earlier this year about vaccines and how to best educate the community, they reached out to city and county officials, including Kavulich.

Kavulich, who led efforts to both protect senior citizens during the pandemic and connect them with vaccines, helped rally community organizations, faith groups, medical providers and others.

"When we do things together, we accomplish the best work," he said. "It's a whole way of life. We always find success in the middle. Those are not just words to me. The results show it's true."

Eight public service announcements, in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Swahili and Nepali languages, air on Electric City Television, with various community leaders taking part.

In April, the Community Corps held its first event, a vaccine clinic directed toward the city's large Nepali/Bhutanese refugee population. Leaders from the association helped distribute information in both English and Nepali. About 300 people received vaccines during the clinic.

“They were very happy to get vaccines at our center. Many people didn’t have a computer to find a vaccine,” said Chandra Sitaula, president of the Bhutanese Cultural Foundation of Scranton Association. “We motivated people to get vaccines.”

A clinic at the Scranton Cultural Center in June included free fresh food. When the clinic became quiet, volunteers went to nearby apartments and vaccinated people outside their homes.

Efforts now focus on providing possible incentives to motivate people who are hesitant to receive the vaccine and increasing efforts in the city’s poorest neighborhoods. Volunteers are now making plans that could involve going door to door or scheduling mobile clinics.

After vaccine efforts end, Kavulich wants to see the network of volunteers and agencies tackle more projects in the region.

“We don’t have to say we’re done with this and walk away,” he said. “We can build off something really incredible.”