

Opinion

How New York's Vaccine Program Missed Black and Hispanic Residents

Vaccination rates lag in some of the communities that have been the hardest hit by the virus.

By The Editorial Board

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New York's vaccination program is struggling. Several weeks in, the state still needs significant help from the federal government — millions more vaccine doses, but also money to set up distribution sites, help staff them and other basic infrastructure. Those people currently eligible for vaccines — New Yorkers 65 and older and certain essential workers — also need more help getting them. This includes providing better information about how to sign up, in as many languages as New Yorkers speak; a system for doing so that doesn't rely primarily on having internet access; vouchers to ensure no lost pay for missed work; more vaccine clinics open late nights and weekends.

All of the above — and more — will need to happen for New York to return to anything resembling life before March 2020. In the race against a pandemic that continues to kill 3,000 Americans each day, figuring out where to start is daunting. But in New York City, one good place would be solving how to ensure more equity in who is getting vaccinated.

Since the earliest days of the pandemic, Black and Latino people in New York City have died from Covid-19 at twice the rate of white New Yorkers. These populations are likelier to be at an increased risk of exposure from their jobs or living in crowded housing. They have less access to medical care but are more likely to have pre-existing conditions that exacerbate infection with the coronavirus. Black, Latino and Native American communities have also seen a greater share of young deaths from Covid-19.

In other words, making sure the people who are eligible in these communities get vaccinated is essential. Yet Black and Latino New Yorkers are now being vaccinated at the lowest rates, shut out by a system that has given an advantage to groups that skew whiter and wealthier.

New data on vaccine distribution shows that 48 percent of people who received at least one vaccine dose in New York City and whose race was recorded were white, 15 percent were Latino and 11 percent were Black. Whites make up 32 percent of the city's population while Latinos make up 29 percent and

Black people make up 24 percent. The share of Asians receiving a vaccine in the city, 15 percent, was about on par with their share of the population. According to the available data, New York City has vaccinated more nonresidents than it has Black, Latino and Native American people who live in the five boroughs combined.

The caveat to this data is that it covers only about half of all people who have received at least their first shot in New York City. Health department officials say that's because a large portion of noncity-run vaccination sites failed to report vaccinations by race. Public health experts, however, say that the data by race they do have shows a definite and concerning trend.

New York State so far has offered vaccine doses to people aged 65 and over — a group that is whiter than the U.S. population at large — and health care workers and certain other essential workers, including teachers, mass transit workers and firefighters. With some exceptions, like mass transit workers, those groups also tend to be slightly whiter over all.

Even when Black and Latino residents are eligible, they aren't getting vaccinated. One major hurdle is the decision by the state and city to use a largely online-based system for making appointments, even though 500,000 households in New York City lack internet access. With a limited supply of vaccine, New Yorkers living in poverty are competing for appointments with wealthier suburbanites who have the time, resources and technical savvy to secure a slot. This is the case even at city-sponsored sites, despite the fact that a majority of those sites, 62 percent according to city officials, are in vulnerable communities.

“It doesn't take rocket science to see why Black and Latinx people aren't getting the vaccine,” said Dr. Mary Bassett, a former New York City health commissioner and the director of the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University. “The people who have the capacity to access the vaccine now are people who are privileged. These are not the people who are facing the highest risk of getting sick and dying. This has to be solved.”

There is no suggestion of widespread fraud, and making sure the vaccines aren't wasted should always be a top priority. But in a pandemic defined by inequality, the racial disparity in vaccine distribution was foreseeable and avoidable. Fortunately, Gov. Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio now appear ready to change New York's approach.

The mayor's office said Sunday that city officials planned to set aside vaccine appointments in 33 high-risk areas for residents in the surrounding neighborhoods. These neighborhoods have high death rates from Covid-19, high rates of poverty and a higher prevalence of chronic illnesses like asthma. City officials said they would begin offering vaccinations to the household family members of vaccine-eligible New Yorkers who live in those high-poverty neighborhoods.

State officials also said they planned to expand their vaccination efforts in high-poverty communities. A state-run vaccination site scheduled to open at Yankee Stadium this week will be open only to residents of the Bronx, which has among the highest poverty rates in the United States.

While these changes are a good start, the state and city can do more.

For example, should officials reorient the vaccination program by ZIP code? Some, such as Mark Levine, the chairman of the City Council's health committee, argue that doing so could give priority to residents in high-poverty areas that have the highest rates of illness and death from Covid.

What does a more ambitious large-scale outreach campaign in underserved communities look like? It will be important to getting more people vaccinated and combating any hesitancy around the vaccines. That could mean sending many more public health workers door-to-door, embedding those workers within communities to help people easily book appointments and creating easy-to-use hotlines in multiple languages. The state and city should also consider expanding its partnerships with community health organizations across New York City, Nassau and Westchester Counties and other places that are already battle-tested and trusted by local residents.

That said, the biggest hurdles don't appear to be mistrust but access. Many people in Latino and Black communities want to get vaccinated but are having trouble securing appointments, said Maria Lizardo, executive director of the Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation, a nonprofit that serves Washington Heights, Inwood and the Bronx.

For all its shortcomings, New York's vaccination effort is improving and aiming to be more equitable in deciding who gets the shots and when. But there's still a long way to go before all the city's residents are protected from the pandemic.

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