

## Editorial: Our next goal in COVID vaccination? Reaching the reachable. Yes, they're out there.

The Editorial Board

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Gabe Lara, 12, front right, receives a complimentary ticket for a one-day admission to Fiesta Texas from Michael Moron, left, with The Health Collaborative, after receiving his second dose of the Pfizer vaccine at a free COVID-19 vaccine clinic in San Antonio held by The Health Collaborative, Presentation Ministry Center, and UIW School of Nursing at Presentation Ministry Center, 2003 Ruiz Street, on Friday, July 30, 2021.

Marvin Pfeiffer, San Antonio Express-News / Staff Photographer

The way out of this pandemic was never through the path of greatest resistance.

Sure, the loudest voices of vaccine conspiracy theorists take up all the oxygen. Their false bravado exhausts and exasperates — and also makes for great headlines and cable TV. If we're honest though, the only folks who have a chance of changing the minds of the most obstinate are their loved ones, and God bless those still willing to try.

But at this point, what's needed more than anything is a concerted, grassroots effort to reach the reachable. We're talking about the folks whose resistance is rooted in confusion, misunderstanding, perhaps genuine fear that can be gently assuaged by a trusted friend, perhaps mere procrastination that can be dislodged with a swift kick from a loved one willing to show some tough love. Perhaps some good old-fashioned conversation with a knowledgeable person who can answer lingering questions or someone who has overcome the same reluctance.

As vaccine expert Dr. Peter Hotez said last month, "We still have the opportunity to vaccinate our way out of this epidemic."

It's really the only way out. People who talk about "herd immunity" never talk about the many thousands more deaths it will take to get there. People who talk about "natural immunity" of those who have already had COVID rarely mention the occurrences of repeated infections or the fact that scientists don't yet know how long immunity lasts after infection. Every eligible American should be vaccinated — not because it prevents infection but because it prevents severe illness and death for virtually everyone who takes it.

The one-on-one approach to persuasion isn't necessarily the most efficient, but it may be the most effective for the vaccine holdouts who have resisted every other large-scale push.

CDC data analyzed by Kaiser indicates Black and Hispanic Americans are less likely to have gotten the shot, , though numbers from late July show their vaccination rates rising.

Misinformation and medicinal mistrust are particularly prominent in communities of color, stemming in part from historical mistreatment from medical professionals toward Black Americans and other barriers to access.

Progress in reaching these folks won't resemble droves of people lined up for miles at a convention center. It's 13 people at a church drive one day, and 60 at a community center the next. Fifteen people at a back-to-school clinic and a few dozen more getting the shot right before an Astros game.

We know it can work because it already has.

One group out there doing the intensive, small-scale work to raise vaccination rates is the Southeast Texas Faith & Community Leaders Coalition, based in Beaumont. Six team members told the editorial board last week that their community, like so many, is awash in vaccine conspiracies. Coordinator Mary Scott said the group has been going directly to apartment complexes with accurate vaccine information, and got approval from some Beaumont businesses to engage with customers about their vaccination drives. The grassroots team got 88 people vaccinated two weekends ago through churches and other centers.

“Success, for me, is one more person vaccinated, one more child vaccinated,” Scott said.

The group’s youngest activist, newly vaccinated 12-year-old Londyn Green, has talked with peers and others to urge vaccination: “I wanted to stay safe. I’m going to school soon and I wanted to be able to play sports and learn face-to-face,” Green said.

Lamar University student Ricky Mendoza said conversations with Hispanic community members revealed concerns about fertility and the vaccine, which numerous health experts have debunked. (And the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists issued a strong recommendation recently that pregnant women should get vaccinated.)

Mendoza said he’s finding that one-on-one conversations with people, in English and in Spanish, are slowly changing minds.

Houston schools are halfway through the “Super Saturday Vaccination Day” campaign. Organized by the city, people 12 and up can go to one of several schools around the county and get vaccinated.

Some local leaders are trying creative incentives. In June, Milam County Judge Steve Young, a Republican, successfully steered the commissioners court to approve \$250 payments to families for each child who gets vaccinated. Young said the court authorized the use of American Rescue Plan Act funds for the initiative, which, as of Friday had vaccinated 104 people ages 12-17.

“We’ve been out front with vaccinations since the beginning,” Young said. “This is about keeping our children and our teachers safe. These vaccines work.”

Milam County’s vaccination rate, like many rural counties, is lagging, but weekly vaccination totals climbed from 140-250 in June and early July to 417 people within a month.

Statewide around that same time period, vaccinations rose from less than 320,000 per week to more than 507,000.

Last week, 3.3 million Americans rolled up their sleeves to get their first shot, said White House COVID-19 response coordinator Jeff Zients. The most significant progress, he noted, is happening in some of the most reluctant states, including Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi.

The momentum is encouraging. It follows news of alarming case numbers and overflowing hospitals. And by now, many more Americans know someone who has been sickened or has died from the disease.

For some people, only a mandate from an employer or perhaps a college or university will provide the needed push. We're encouraged that more hospitals, businesses and other entities are requiring vaccinations, and glad to see the Greater Houston Partnership advise its members last week to consider that option.

Also last week, the U.S. Supreme Court allowed Indiana University's vaccine requirement to stay in place. We applaud Justice Amy Coney Barrett's decision to reject a plea from eight students challenging the mandate.

But it's our fellow Texans and Americans in the trenches now — apartment buildings and grocery stores and family gatherings — who deserve the most praise and support.

The vaccinated among us may be thinking, "I did my part." Yes, but each time one of us persuades a family member to get a shot, or spends two hours in the community sharing accurate vaccine information, we save more lives and turn this devastating surge around for all.

We need more active campaigns that feature direct contact with people. We need to talk with the skeptical and drown out the conspiracies. We need to ride the current momentum and keep doing our part to get people vaccinated. Each person persuaded means one life protected, one life potentially saved — and that's no minimal achievement. For that one person, it's everything.