

Churches in LA's working-class neighborhoods urge: 'bring the vaccine to the people'

LA has been described as the epicenter of COVID-19, and many who are eligible for the vaccine are still unable to access it.

Religious leaders want to change that.

February 3, 2021 – by Alejandra Molina

LOS ANGELES (RNS) — For the past two months, the Rev. Austin Doran has found himself hosting outdoor Mass for at least one COVID-19 funeral every week at St. Anthony Catholic Church in the city of San Gabriel, where many of his congregants are Spanish-speaking and working-class Latinos.

In the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, Doran said there was a “wave of apprehension and fear.” Now, he said, “it’s a wave of infections.”

“It’s a dramatic difference,” he told Religion News Service. “We see the sad evidence in our rate of funerals.”

Doran is experiencing firsthand how the virus is infiltrating the homes of his

parishioners, many of them essential workers living in small apartments and houses they share with family. He’s seen relatives of parishioners, of church volunteers and staff die after being infected with the virus.

Now, his parishioners are facing a new challenge in accessing the vaccines.

Doran is among a group of religious leaders and organizers in the Los Angeles area who are urging county officials to focus on vaccinating residents in neighborhoods that need it the most — areas such as El Monte, South Central LA, Boyle Heights and Pacoima — where Latino and Black residents, many who are essential workers, have been hit hard by the virus. And they have a plan to do it.

The group is part of **One LA**, an organization made up of churches, synagogues, schools and other nonprofit groups, who at a Zoom news conference Tuesday (Feb. 2) released



Drivers with a vaccine appointment enter a mega COVID-19 vaccination sit set up in the parking lot of Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles on Jan. 30, 2021. While this vaccination approach works for some, the One LA organization wants vaccine brought directly to the most impacted members of the community.

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a [six-point plan](#) to address inequities in vaccine access. This, after the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health released [data](#) showing health care workers living in South Central LA, home to many Black and Latino residents, were vaccinated at lower rates than those in other regions.

In California, health care workers, residents of long-term and nursing facilities, teachers, farmworkers, and those who are 65 and older are currently eligible for the vaccine. Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer in late January said there were 189 vaccination sites open across the county in health care clinics, pharmacies and in large-scale venues such as Dodger Stadium. She said more vaccination sites were opening in South Central LA.

“We are urging LA County to bring the vaccine directly to the people who need it the most,” said Yvonne Maria Jimenez, of One LA.

In One LA’s plan, the county would partner with congregations, schools and other organizations “better suited to provide information, dispel fears and myths and guide people through the process of registering for an appointment,” said Diane Vanette, a member of Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills and a leader with One LA, at the news conference.

The plan calls for mobile vaccination teams that would set up temporary sites in the hardest-hit neighborhoods. Volunteers from neighborhood churches and other organizations could do door-to-door canvassing to educate residents about the vaccine, as well as help people sign up for the vaccine from parking lots of parishes and other sites.

Vanette said the hardest-hit communities can be identified through U.S. Census tracts with the highest incidents of COVID-19 and lowest rates of vaccination.

“By targeting the hot spots first, we would be able to save lives and break the chain of transmission,” Vanette said.

Marta Gonzalez, an organizer with One LA, said the group decided to go public with its effort after seeing eligible residents being left behind in the vaccination process.

Despite their eligibility, the vaccine “still didn’t reach to our community,” she told Religion News Service.

Some don’t have access to computers or, because of work, don’t have the time to spend hours or even days online trying to secure a vaccination appointment. Others rely on public transportation and have to figure out how to get to vaccination sites they’re unfamiliar with. Gonzalez said the involvement of the faith community is crucial to reach equity in the vaccination process.

“They are the centers of trust in our community. They know the people that have been most affected by it,” she said. “It’s part of their mission and their church to call out an injustice when they see it.”

For the Rev. Kenneth Keke, pastor of St. Brigid Catholic Church in South Central LA, “we feel like our community is left behind in this crucial time,” he said.

Keke, whose church is predominantly Black and Latino, said many who are eligible are ready and willing to be vaccinated but don’t have access. Meanwhile, others still don’t think the vaccine is effective, he said.

“A good number of my church members are battling with the virus,” he said.

Keke said his cantor contracted the virus from his uncle, who then passed it on to his elderly mother, and now everyone in that household is sick. His parish secretary told him Tuesday that her uncle had died the day before of COVID-19.

“This is how bad it is in this community,” Keke said.

Keke said his church, which worked with St. John’s Well Child and Family Center to offer free COVID-19 testing, is ready to partner with the county to help educate the community about the vaccine.

For now, Doran said, his church is sending the message that getting vaccinated is an “act of charity.”

Doran said his church is prepared to take a more active role by partnering with the county and other organizations to help residents get through the vaccination process. If needed, he said, the parish could also be used as a vaccination site. Residents would feel more confident getting the vaccine at a place they’re familiar with, Doran said.

“They’re used to coming to our church,” he said. “They know how to get there.”