Freddie Woods opened his apartment door in New Orleans East when he heard the sounds of brass music. Moments later, a canvasser for Together Louisiana — a community engagement nonprofit — placed a flyer in his hand and told him that the organization was hosting a vaccination event at a church within walking distance from Woods’ home the next day. The All For One Brass Band that drew Woods out of his apartment would be playing at the vaccination event, and the first 100 people to receive shots could enjoy a fish fry.

“This is my first time hearing about it,” Woods said. “But I got to go get it done.”

The event was held at St. Maria Gorretti Catholic Church, in a neighborhood in New Orleans East with one of the lowest vaccination rates in the city at just under 7 percent as of March 31. For two weeks canvassers from Together Louisiana walked the area’s streets, handing out flyers and attempting to make appointments for people who hadn’t already been vaccinated against the coronavirus.

For the group’s last canvassing effort, they brought along the band.
As demand for COVID-19 vaccine declines, public health officials say on-the-ground efforts like this are what’s needed.

Health Officer Dr. Joseph Kanter sees the vaccination rollout in a few phases: One when vaccine doses were scarce and health departments had to “triage” them to the populations with the highest risk then offering vaccines to the general public and seeing people who were eager to get immunized. The phase that health officials are in now is reaching people who are indifferent or cautious about the vaccines.

“In talking to people, [they] feel like they will likely get vaccinated at some point, they’re just not there yet, or they haven't gotten around to it, or they have questions, or they’re still waiting and seeing and talking to people. So therein lies the opportunity,” Kanter said. “After you vaccinated everyone that was really self-motivated to do so, the work then becomes more deliberate and harder.”

For canvassers Mimi Ayers and Katie Perry, engagement looks like sharing their vaccination stories whenever people they encounter have questions about the experience.

“I'll say, 'I got vaccinated. I did the Moderna shot. Here were my symptoms.' Because I think it helps a lot for them to have a real person in front of them who's taken it. One person actually [told me] that,” Perry said.

There are also people who feel they can’t find the time to prioritize vaccination.

In an op-ed, CrescentCare’s infectious disease lead Dr. Jason Halperin described a phone call he’d had with a man who was reluctant to get vaccinated because as the main caretaker in a multigenerational home with four children, he couldn’t risk feeling ill from the flu-like symptoms that many vaccine recipients say they experienced.

Ayers received the Pfizer vaccine in February when it was available to her age group. She said some people she’s encountered while going door to door were already planning to be vaccinated and just needed the extra push of having someone offer shots in their area.

“I got one person who said, ‘You made my day,’ because he wasn't able to schedule an appointment,” Ayers said.

The Together Louisiana approach is derived from the organization's efforts to engage voters during elections. The nonprofit is a partner in the Louisiana
Department of Health’s “Bring Back Louisiana” campaign to reach herd immunity against the coronavirus.

“[The health department] really gravitated to the idea of what we usually do for Get Out The Vote, which is going door to door having direct conversations and connecting with people,” said Khalida Lloyd, a media representative for Together Louisiana and an organizer of the event at St. Maria Gorretti church.

Small Events Can Offer Incentives, But Can’t Provide Big Vaccination Numbers

Other event organizers and establishments have joined the effort to vaccinate, using what they know best. For bars, that’s been offering alcohol. Larry Flynt’s Hustler Club is the latest watering hole to offer shots for shots. The event kicks off at 4 p.m. on Friday, May 7, New Orleans DJ RQAway teamed up with CrescentCare for a vaccination event on Saturday, May 8, at the Broadside, an outdoor performance space and cinema next to the Broad Theater. For those groups, offering incentives, like food and music have been key.

“What can make something exciting more than food and music, particularly for New Orleans?” Lloyd of Together Louisiana said. “When you went canvassing and told people, ‘Hey, we’re having this event, come on out, anyone who comes out can get vaccinated, and we’re also going to have fish and a brass band, people’s faces lit up.”

Other groups rely on the strong community ties they’ve already built. Dillard University’s Office of Community and Church Relations has been organizing health fairs and other neighborhood engagement events at small churches in socially vulnerable areas in New Orleans for several years.

“This is really a long-term project to work in underserved communities that were somewhat invisible to the general population prior to Katrina,” Director Nick Harris said.

Harris’s office has organized several vaccination events that will offer the Pfizer vaccine through DePaul Community Health Centers at churches in Central City, Gentilly and other areas. He said it’s been critical to utilize churches in the middle of communities.

“I'm talking about the small church that backs up on Holly Street, nobody never heard of the church before, but everyone in the community knows about it,” Harris said. “It's very important to go to the church, they want to go somewhere where they feel comfortable.”
Placing multiple events at different churches in the same neighborhood means people who don’t have a car won’t have to travel very far to receive vaccinations. It also means a lower capacity to vaccinate at each event.

Harris said the maximum number of shots each drive can deliver is 200.

Health Director Kanter acknowledges that the on-the-ground effort to vaccinate everyone is a slower process.

“It takes time and intention to really go on the grassroots level into communities, engage people in conversation, connect people to experts. That's what it's gonna take for the next phase,” he said. “But it's going to be a slower, more deliberate process.”

The event at St. Maria Gorretti Catholic Church provided first doses of the Moderna vaccine to 119 people. Two people received their second dose.

An event in April at the Dragon’s Den bar that offered shots of alcohol for shots of the one-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine, organized by DJ RQAway and CrescentCare, vaccinated 164 people. Vaccinators were prepared to provide 200 doses. On a rainy Saturday, an event at Kermit’s Treme Mother in Law Lounge, offering the Moderna vaccine, drew roughly 50 people.

The hope is that as more community events pop up, the vaccination rate will increase because of the level of engagement.

Dillard’s office of community hosted its first event in Central City on Friday. Its next event will be at Union Bethel Church on Tuesday. Together Louisiana plans to host another event at St. Maria Gorretti on May 29 to provide second shots for patients who got first doses on Saturday.