



TO: Interested Parties
FROM: United States of Care
SUBJECT: Meeting people where they are: Increasing vaccine confidence among unsure individuals
DATE: February 12, 2021

For the next several months, the top priority for advancing public health and keeping people safe from COVID-19 vaccine education and distribution. Crucial to that effort is maximizing the number of people choosing to get vaccinated.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, leading research — from the Kaiser Family Foundation, de Beaumont Foundation, [United State of Care](#), and others — has shown that people across demographics want *accurate information they can rely on to keep us and our families safe*. We have also learned that groups of people find themselves with differing points and levels of concern about the vaccine.

People’s concerns about the vaccine are real and they deserve empathetic, straightforward answers as they consider if the vaccine is right for them. Understanding and addressing these concerns now, early in the national vaccination process, is key for overall equitable vaccine uptake and protecting the most vulnerable.

About this document: This memo was created by assembling studies and polling results, interviewing researchers, and interpreting their findings. The analysis and resulting messaging recommendations in this document can form the baseline for how we, as health and vaccine advocates, engage in the effort to address people’s concerns and help the country reach maximum vaccination levels.

Examining current vaccine concern: There are a lot of people who aren’t yet sure about taking a COVID-19 vaccine.

- [31% people are waiting to learn more](#) before they choose whether to take a COVID-19 vaccine
- 57% of people say they don’t have enough information about the shots’ side effects.
 - This number increases to [two-in-three when surveying only Hispanics/Latinos and Black people](#).
- 49% of all people say that they don’t yet know enough about the vaccines’ effectiveness.
 - This number increases to around [60% when surveying only Hispanics/Latinos and Black people](#).

What makes people unsure about COVID-19 vaccines? A large group of people are skeptical and concerned, with questions about side effects, adverse reactions, and long term effects.

- [Fully one-third of people](#) have real fears about short- and long-term side effects of the shots.
- [When people hear about side effects](#) without detail about the rarity of those effects, they become more concerned.
 - 39% become less-eager to be vaccinated when hearing about the small number of about severe allergic reactions.
 - 33% drop in enthusiasm when they learn of short-term side effects like fever and pain.
- Over the past eleven months, people have become more and more worried about the seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - [For the first time, a majority are now “very concerned”](#) about themselves or their family becoming sick.
 - Including those who are “somewhat concerned,” we reach eight-in-ten people fearing for their safety and that of their loved ones.
- Concern among people of color also has a valid and serious historical basis in racist public health endeavors in the nation’s past.
 - [Especially when considering the speed](#) at which vaccines have been developed and released, Black individuals and Hispanics/Latinos have many reasons to feel concern.

The data are clear. Right now, while the government is focused on vaccine supply and distribution, it is up to us — advocates, public officials, and media alike — to do what we can to increase confidence in the vaccines.

To do that, we need to meet people where they currently are and give them the information they need with consideration and clarity.

Addressing people’s questions: COVID-19 vaccine effectiveness and safety

Vaccine enthusiasm increases with a set of straightforward, factual messages about the vaccines’ effectiveness.

- Majorities of all people become more confident when learning that:
 - [The vaccines are “highly effective in preventing illness;”](#)
 - [The vaccines will “prevent them \(the message recipient\) from getting sick.”](#)
- A majority of people also become more confident when considering that [vaccines “will prevent more people from becoming sick and prevent more deaths.”](#)

Simple, factual, empathetic messages also go far in addressing specific concerns about vaccines’ short- and long-term safety.

- [Describing simply the safety review process](#) by the FDA and safety boards is a strong way to assuage concerns.
 - **Messaging example:** “A safety board approved every study, and the FDA carefully reviewed the data from every phase of every vaccine trial.”
- Facts about the [infrequency of reactions and realities of side-effects](#) are also very helpful.

- **Messaging example:** “The likelihood of a serious reaction is less than 0.5%.”
 - In even simpler language: Fewer than five people in every thousand have had a serious reaction.
- It’s also positive to [explain the common causes](#) of short-term side effects with relatable, caring language.
 - **Messaging example:** “When people do have mild side effects, they’re a normal sign your body is building protection to the virus. Most go away within a few days.”

Addressing people’s concerns: Meeting them where they are

Despite their increasing concern about their own and their loved ones’ health, people are **largely optimistic** about the course of COVID-19, with two-thirds of people expressing their hope.

- This number is also right at two-thirds when focusing on just the individuals who are waiting to see more information about vaccines.

People are also increasingly hopeful about the direction of vaccine distribution.

- Half of all individuals — the same number for those who aren’t immediately ready to take the shots — expect vaccine distribution to get better under the new presidential administration.

Messaging points:

- Start discussions by relating to people’s optimism. Even those who are not sure about taking the vaccines are hopeful for the future.
- Make it okay for people to have questions. It’s not uncommon!
 - [“I hear you.”](#) is shown to be a powerful starter to addressing concerns.
 - Concerns and optimism are perfectly reasonable to hold at the same time

Meeting people where they are: Knowing who’s concerned

Research can teach us a lot about who the less-eager groups are. Three major groups have been identified whose concerns are substantial and whose vaccine uptake is critical for their communities and for the country as a whole.

Critical groups and topline background

- **Black Individuals:**
 - The largest racial or ethnic group with vaccine concerns. 43% of all Black Americans are “waiting for more information.”
 - Highly aware of the seriousness of the pandemic, with 86% believing the to be as serious as reported or more serious (51%; 35%).
 - Almost half of all Black Americans personally know someone who has died from COVID-19.
- **Hispanics/Latinos:**
 - More than one-third of Hispanics/Latinos in the country are waiting to see before making their vaccine decisions.

- They're well apprised to the gravity of the pandemic, with 68% feeling that COVID is either as serious as reported or more serious. However, 30% feel the pandemic is overexaggerated in seriousness.
- Hispanics/Latinos utilize public health services at higher rates than others. 30% tend to go to neighborhood clinics and 14% go first to the emergency room.
- **Political Conservatives:**
 - A plurality (34%) of Republicans and conservatives are not immediately ready to get COVID-19 vaccines.
 - More than any other group, less-enthusiastic conservatives believe the COVID-19 pandemic to be "generally exaggerated" (50%).
 - Two-thirds of concerned Republicans first seek care at their private doctor. Only one-in-ten use a community health center.

These groups have distinct messaging needs and research shows us that, though challenging at times, we're able to address their concerns and work toward our responsibility to increase vaccine confidence.

There is one piece of important shared opinion among members of the critical groups identified above:

- **Deciding to take the COVID-19 vaccine is a "personal choice."**
 - This is a feeling shared by most people who are not sure about vaccines.
 - It's a **more-commonly held opinion of unsure political conservatives**, who believe this at a rate of 67%.

Our responsibility: Build the confidence that people need in order to make that personal choice.

How we do it: Deploy the right message and right messenger.

1. Public officials as messengers:

- Public officials in America should **prioritize speaking directly to Black and Hispanic/Latino people.**
 - Members of these two communities plan at very high rates to seek vaccination information from the **CDC and their local/state health departments.**
 - **Public officials are also the most important messengers to help minimize historical concern among Black and Hispanic/Latino people based in racist public health measures.** Caring acknowledgement of history is important to opening conversation about vaccine choices.
- Many believe that **highlighting conservative leaders who took the vaccine** may make an impact on "wait and see" conservatives.
- **Public officials' messages:**
 - Focus on positives. Help people stay hopeful while meeting their concerns about effectiveness and safety.
 - The vaccines are "**highly effective at preventing illness.**"

- With more and more people being vaccinated every single day, there are a lot of reasons for **optimism**.
 - The vaccines were developed with [unprecedented cooperation](#) between scientists, health and medical experts, and researchers.
- Help them keep their faith in the government processes that helped develop the vaccine.
 - **For safety concerns:** “Every study, every phase, and every trial was reviewed by the FDA and a safety board.”
- Public officials also should give vaccine credit where credit is due. **This is one of the only widely compelling messages to political conservatives.**
 - “The vaccine was developed, at record speed, under the Trump Administration.”

2. Doctors and nurses as messengers:

- Less-eager people across the board want to hear from **doctors and nurses**. To help people make the personal choice to get vaccinated, an individual provider’s message needs to focus on the health of the person making the vaccination choice.
- This is especially true for **political conservatives**, who are most-likely to see a private doctor who they have an ongoing relationship with.
- **Doctors and nurses’ messages:**
 - Doctors and nurses are ideally positioned to explain the positive personal health effects of vaccination.
 - “Getting a COVID-19 vaccine is the best way to keep yourself from getting sick.”
 - “Getting vaccinated will help keep you, your family, and your community healthy and safe.”
 - Doctors and nurses are also critical messengers to assuage concerns about vaccine safety. Their individual touch with the person making the vaccine choice is a major asset.
 - [“I hear you.”](#) is again a powerful opener to conversations about concern and allows for a doctor or nurse to share a story of seeking out information themselves.
 - Doctors and nurses must also **emphasize the normality of side-effects** and explain how they’re indicative of the vaccine starting to work.

3. Media as messengers:

- We, as vaccine advocates, should monitor the tone and tenor of vaccine reporting and work with journalists to ensure that coverage does not have a negative effect on COVID-19 vaccine uptake.
- The onus is on us to be communicating the concerns of people who have not yet chosen to be vaccinated, including in conversations with media.
- Instead of focusing on “vaccine hesitancy,” the media should understand that “people have concerns and are skeptical.” To ensure this, we need to focus on **“increasing their confidence in the vaccine so they can make their personal choice to take the vaccine.”**

- Surveys will likely continue to find that large numbers of people are unsure about the vaccines. Journalism about those surveys must include what we know to be true:
 - Concern is understandable.
 - Concern is not wrong.
 - People’s questions deserve answers. We know how to do that and we know who’s best to do it.

Important overall considerations

Remember that increasing vaccine confidence is about speaking directly to people. Language can be powerfully motivational and — just as importantly powerfully demotivational.

Relating to the individual is paramount and speaking in compassionate, understanding ways about the facts are our two biggest assets. When we examine data about broadly effective messages, we find our three targeted groups do respond well to framing the benefits of the vaccines: Republicans are most motivated by the personal benefit of the vaccine for themselves; Black people for themselves and the community; and Hispanics for themselves and their family.

Along with that, it’s important to know some of the things which are not particularly effective in helping people make their vaccine choice:

- **No shaming or lecturing.** People understand and appreciate that the health of their families and communities is at stake, but we should not be dictating right and wrong for them. Acting as the arbiters of a concerned person’s morals is not helpful.
- **Using language that might be considered flippant or dismissive:** “Getting shots in arms,” for instance. This doesn’t speak to any concerns that people have and can appear to diminish seriousness.
- **Important point:** Language about “**getting back to normal**” is also not broadly helpful. We can’t be sure of anyone’s idea of normalcy, and speaking this way doesn’t only fail to motivate, it can appear dismissive of what a person considers normal in their lives.
 - Perhaps surprisingly, concerned conservatives do not respond positively to vaccines’ role in “getting the economy back on track.” (only 27%.)

Advocates in the health space must do all we can to meet people’s informational and emotional needs before they can make their vaccine decision. Meeting people where they are and providing clear, compassionate answers to their concerns is all of our responsibility, so that we together can see an end to the COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating effects on our lives — and the particularly devastating effects on the lives of people of color in our country.

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