

Offering beer, babysitting and barbershop outreach, the White House launches new initiatives to boost vaccinations



Roan Joseph, 44, left, and Reginald Alston, 57, sit for 15 minutes after getting vaccinated May 17 at The Shop Spa, a Hyattsville, Md., barbershop that is part of the barbershop initiative.

Washington Post photo by Ricky Carioti

President Biden announced a raft of new private-sector initiatives on Wednesday to encourage Americans to get vaccinated, as his administration increasingly looks to outside partners to help meet its goal of 70% of adult Americans with at least one shot of a coronavirus vaccine by the Fourth of July.

Declaring June a "national month of action," the administration wants to incentivize Americans who are hesitant about the vaccines with a range of perks, including free food delivery, baseball tickets, Xboxes and chances to win cruise tickets, groceries for a year and free airline flights.

The White House also announced the launch of a handful of community-based outreach initiatives, including blanketing local media, providing colleges with resources and launching an effort to recruit 1,000 Black-owned barbershops and beauty salons across the country.

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The more aggressive push to vaccinate Americans comes as just under 63% of American adults have received at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine, but demand is dropping and the remaining unvaccinated population is becoming harder to reach and convince that the vaccines are safe.

As part of the announcement, Biden underscored the safety and efficacy of the authorized vaccines while warning of the dangers of remaining unvaccinated heading into the fall.

"For all the progress we're making as a country, if you are unvaccinated, you are still at risk of getting seriously ill or dying or spreading disease to others, especially when Americans spend more time indoors again, closely gathered in the fall," Biden said in his speech announcing the initiatives.

Drawing on political campaign tactics, Biden said the vaccination efforts will include canvassing and phone and texting banks to reach people in areas with low vaccination rates.

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"We need everyone across the country to pull together to get us over the finish line," he said.

Speaking to the partisan divides in vaccine uptake, Biden emphasized the Trump administration's role in developing the vaccine. Many conservative areas, in particular, lag behind in vaccinating their populations as rates vary widely across the country. Some states have given at least one dose to two-thirds of the population, while others have reached slightly more than one-third.

"Getting the vaccine is not a partisan act," Biden said. "The science was done under Democratic and Republican administrations. Matter of fact, the first vaccines were authorized under a Republican president."

The private-sector enticements include a CVS-run sweepstakes to win free cruises, tickets to Super Bowl LVI and cash prizes; gift cards from DoorDash; free tickets to Major League Baseball games for those vaccinated at stadiums; Xboxes distributed by Microsoft through Boys and Girls Clubs in hard-hit areas; free groceries from Kroger; and a sweepstakes run by United Airlines to win a year of free flights.

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Anheuser-Busch also announced it would give away free beer if the country reaches Biden's 70% goal.

"Get a shot and have a beer," Biden said Wednesday.

The administration's wide-ranging efforts to encourage Americans to get vaccinated stand in stark contrast to much of the rest of the world, where vaccines are still in scarce supply. The United States has started to share more vaccine doses with the world, but it has been criticized for not doing enough, especially as cases and deaths plummet in the country.

"All over the world people are desperate to get a shot that every American can get at their neighborhood drugstore," Biden said, acknowledging the disparity in vaccine access.

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Biden also tasked Vice President Kamala Harris with leading a "We Can Do This" national tour to highlight ways to get vaccinated. The White House said her focus will be on Southern states, where vaccinations lag much of the rest of the country.

To increase vaccine accessibility for parents, the White House said that four of the nation's largest child-care providers will offer free child care to all parents and caregivers getting vaccinated or recovering from vaccination from now until July 4.

The announcement of "Shots at the Shop" builds on the success of several barbershops around the country that have held vaccination clinics. Vaccination levels lag in Black and Brown communities, among others, and the barbershop initiative is seen as one way to persuade those who have been hit hardest by the pandemic but are often reluctant to get the shots.

It is a collaboration between the Department of Health and Human Services; the Black Coalition Against Covid-19, a Washington, D.C.-based community organization; the University of Maryland's Center for Health Equity; and the SheaMoisture hair products company.

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The four partners are encouraging barbers and stylists to take part in a training session about the coronavirus vaccines this month and hold vaccination clinics in their shops in partnership with health providers, said Cameron Webb, a senior health equity adviser on the administration's coronavirus response team.

"We are acknowledging the critical role barbershops and beauty salons play in these communities hard hit by the pandemic," Webb said in an interview.

Barbershops in any community will be able to apply to participate in the new program, but priority will be given to those in parts of the country where vaccination rates are lowest. Webb said the priority will be about 30 cities where there are still significant gaps. Many are in the South, including places such as Atlanta; Charlotte, N.C.; San Antonio; Greensboro, N.C.; and Birmingham, Ala.

Webb said officials "would love to see all 1,000 shops do vaccination events," noting that is the goal. But organizers also are relying on the unique role of barbershops and beauty salons as gathering places to dispel disinformation and misinformation about the vaccines.

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Barbers and stylists have been hubs of information in the Black community for generations, he said. "The conversations happen naturally, and by having barbers and stylists gain insight and knowledge about how vaccines work and their key mechanisms, that information can be spread to the rest of the community through a trusted messenger," he added.

The Anheuser-Busch campaign will offer adults 21 and older a virtual debit card once the United States hits that 70 percent milestone.

"Let's get ready for a summer like no other," says a new ad from the company about the push. "Let's get ready for the greatest time in history to grab a beer."

Cesar Vargas, Anheuser-Busch's chief external affairs officer, said the company wanted to encourage vaccinations for those who haven't received them yet, "because that's one big part of how we can all get back together."

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"Whether that's reuniting at local neighborhood bars and restaurants, getting together at a ballgame or getting together in your backyard over a barbecue, we want people to start getting back together again," Vargas said in an interview. "Vaccinations are one part of that."

Reed Tuckson, a former D.C. health director and founder of the Black Coalition Against Covid-19, said the country is at a "very, very critical stage." Those who were eager to get vaccinated have already

done so, but "now we're down to needing to close out those still waiting, those who still have questions and another group that is really digging in" to decline the shots, he said.

Biden's strategy of reaching out to specific communities "is very appropriate" because "we cannot overemphasize enough how this is a true race to the finish before [virus] variants take root," he said. "This is the moment to pour everything we have into it."

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The Washington Post's Paulina Firozi contributed to this report.