

White House advisor: We're making headway on COVID-19 vaccination



WHITE HOUSE PHOTO

Dr. Cameron Webb is White House senior policy advisor for COVID-19 equity.



Throughout the global coronavirus pandemic, African Americans have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

However, cases have dramatically decreased for Black people with about 60% of African Americans in the United States vaccinated according to Dr. Cameron Webb, White House senior policy advisor for COVID-19 Equity.

Black people make up nearly 12% of newly reported cases, with white people making up 51% of new cases according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention COVID Data Tracker.

In a recent interview with The Post, Webb discusses COVID cases and vaccination rates in African Americans, and how the White House is spreading the word about COVID-19 vaccines in the Black community.

Q: During the pandemic, COVID cases have disproportionately affected the Black community. Has there been a significant change in the number of COVID cases reported in African Americans?

WEBB: Absolutely! If you look back at the earliest stage of the pandemic, the rate of COVID cases in the Black community returned higher in the Black community, and I think that gap was really profound. We saw more hospitalizations and deaths. A couple of things have happened and certainly the vaccines have helped decrease the number of folks who are getting sick. We have a lot of data that's suggesting that at least three out of five Black people are vaccinated at this point, which has gone a long way to reduce the spread of COVID and decreases hospitalizations and deaths, particularly in older Black adults.

So that's been a huge benefit year that we've seen is that the Black community has really leaned into these mitigation measures, masking has been adhered to more in the Black community and in many other communities and so, people are taking this seriously. We were hit so hard by this pandemic, on the front end, that we know from our families, from our community, from our social relationships, we know the toll that this virus can take. And I think that people are responding accordingly. So, the case rate is down significantly from where it was the height of the pandemic.

But we are seeing a simple Delta variant started spreading with increased speed over the last few months, we're seeing that rates start to come up a little bit again, so we're keeping a close eye and continuing to push the community to stay protected everywhere they can.

Q: Has there been a significant change in the number of African Americans who are receiving COVID and who are receiving the COVID vaccine? Is there any data to show for this?

WEBB: Yeah, absolutely. So, the vaccination rate has increased significantly in the Black community. If you look since April, more than half of the vaccines that have been delivered, have been to communities of color. And specifically, while about a quarter of those have gone into the Latino community.

If you look over the last six, eight weeks (before September), about 15% of the Black community, it's been a big increase in the share that the Black population makes up about being vaccinated over the last, six months or so. That happened to be the same period of time where we've seen a big uptick in vaccinations, if you look over the last four to six weeks. A lot more people have been getting vaccinated because we're seeing a lot more delta variant (cases) and people are responding accordingly. With this most recent uptick in vaccinations, again, the Black population is being vaccinated at higher rates and endpoints previously in the pandemic, which is good news.

At this point, if you look at the overall vaccination share, about 10.3%, of those who have received at least one dose of the vaccine are Black, and that's certainly below the 12.4% of the (Black) population that they make up; an improvement over one percentage point over the last month. Actually, the Kaiser Family Foundation just released a study, looking at the increase in the vaccination rate, and looking

month over month, they saw the biggest gains in the Black community in the Latino community over the last couple of weeks.

So, we are seeing a lot of improvement, we're seeing a lot of folks in the Black community respond to the (Pfizer) vaccine getting full approval from the FDA. I think getting that gold standard stamp of approval from the FDA is a big difference maker in the Black community. And so, we're seeing that bear out as well. So, definitely making even more progress. And it's good to see more people getting protected. But we still have room to go particularly in younger people 18 to 29, and also 12 to 17. We're seeing that in the Black community. So, we have lower rates of vaccination, and this goes back to making sure their getting vaccinated too.

Q: How is the White House ensuring African Americans who live in low-income areas have access to a COVID-19 vaccination site?

WEBB: Yeah, so there are a lot of different ways. It's actually been a center point of the way that we design our vaccine rollout. We started off with mass vaccination sites and I think that was a big part of it, because we wanted to make sure that those who are located in areas with more socioeconomic challenges. In particular, we call it social vulnerability. Social vulnerability index means those formed to place our mass vaccination sites, and so that was a big deal. Our pharmacies are predominantly located in higher FDI or social vulnerability communities, which again, are disproportionately Black and brown, and I think that was the second thrust of our program.

We moved vaccines through our federally qualified health care, the community health, lower income communities of color, they largely use community health centers as the primary place for primary care, and so making sure that we're evacuating people to those sites is important too. We designed vaccination efforts to community based and faith-based organizations. And that's been a big deal.

We launched a barber shop and beauty salon initiative called "Shots at the Shop", where over 1000 barbershops and beauty salons across the country have signed up not only to get training about the virus in the vaccine, but the whole vaccination events of their shop. And I went to four of those events just last week, and they're making a difference in community discourse, but also in community vaccination. And that's just to name a few, I think at the core of it is making sure that we're removing barriers to access. And so that's why we're making sure that there (is) paid time off from work for folks to get vaccinated, why we instituted policies around folks having childcare access so there's not that additional cost so that if they want to get vaccinated, they have childcare sites, if they want to go get vaccinated, we have free transportation to and from vaccination sites – Uber and Lyft, and we're leading the way on that.

But also, a lot of public transportation agencies and why we've been ramping up the number of Trusted Sites. I could go on and on. There's a tremendous number of efforts focused specifically on communities of color to make sure that we're expanding true access to the vaccines, in addition to that complementing that access look with confidence look, making sure, we're listening, we're engaging, we're answering the questions, we're building the trust necessary to get folks vaccinated. We're leaning into local trusted messengers. We're getting folks information that they can believe in, and that they can trust. And we think the combination of all of those activities is how we get our community sufficiently protected against this virus from so many people.

Q: You mentioned earlier cases increased among young Black youth. What is the White House doing to increase awareness about vaccines in younger adults?

WEBB: We're doing a tremendous amount. So, a lot of work through schools, specifically for the

Department of Education. I've been meeting with a lot of roundtables, in concert with our COVID team meeting, we're meeting with students and parents in a lot of communities. But even beyond that, we have our youth community core that the surgeon general is running, where we have a lot of young folks around the country who are hoping to share good information in their communities. So certainly going through schools, we have targeted messaging going out on social media, and also through television.

We're making sure we're getting the word out. We're working with a lot of Black owned and operated media outlets to make sure we're getting the word out to those spaces. I think that by large, a lot of it is making sure that you're getting trusted messengers to talk about it. That's where working with, Black health care providers and physicians and public health professionals who are operating in their own communities, to help spread the word and increase confidence.

[For] HBCU Week, being a part of the White House Initiative on HBCUs. We just did an event ... with myself and Dr. (Anthony) Fauci meeting with five HBCU students from across the country, who've been doing tremendous work in their communities to get more people vaccinated, and just lifting up young people who are leading the charge and leading the way, and helping keep their communities and their institutions protected.

I think just continuing to spread that message to answer the questions that folks have to avail ourselves to community to get good information to combat the misinformation. Those really are the keys, all the while maintaining access, and making sure that people are able to use the information from people they know and trust.



Q: Some Black people are hesitant about getting the COVID shot because of the Tuskegee experiment. What would you say to a person who is hesitant about getting the vaccine because of past experiments done on Black people?

WEBB: It's interesting, because I hear that more from the media than I hear from Black people, and I do so much work in community view of community members and leaders. And if you talk to community leaders in the Black community, what most of them will tell you is that this is very different than Tuskegee. I was in Alabama last week. They were saying, we are in Tuskegee. We know this legacy. In fact, the descendants of the Tuskegee syphilis study, they actually came out with a series of public service announcements saying this is nothing like that.

In fact, it's the opposite. In the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, what was withheld was lifesaving treatments. That's what was withheld from those men who were involved in those studies, and here, what's being offered is the lifesaving intervention. I think that the data is very clear on that one of the legacies of the Tuskegee study is that we hold our society to a very high ethical standard on anything that we're administering to any people. I think that the Tuskegee study really shined a light on the fact that our country wasn't doing a good job of that through 1972, at least. I think that this is so different.

But I think that by and large in the Black community, I hear most people, most community members, community leaders, to say no, this is different, and they want to get information on safety and efficacy. But I will say I hear the Tuskegee statement a lot more from media than I hear from community members, believe it or not.

Aaliyah Bowden, who reports on health at The Post, is a Report for America corps member.