

Delta Sigma Theta co-hosts COVID-19 vaccine drive: 'If we're the ones promoting this event, it will help'

Hope Oliver, one of the organizers behind a local COVID-19 vaccine drive, said while vaccinations have transformed into a political issue, it's important to remember it's really a public health issue.

"There's a lot of fear in the community, so we felt like if we're the ones promoting this event, it will help," Oliver said.

The second round of the Rutherford County COVID-19 Vaccine Drive is scheduled for Saturday, October 23 at the Olive Branch in Murfreesboro. Pfizer vaccines and booster shots will be administered by the Tennessee Department of Health for anyone over age 11.

Residents are also welcomed to ask health officials questions.

The event is hosted by the Rutherford County Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., a historically Black sorority. It's also hosted by the Urban League of Middle Tennessee and the Pyramid Foundation of Tennessee, a nonprofit that supports mental health awareness in women and girls.

The three groups aim to keep the community safe during the pandemic, with an emphasis on an underserved group — children and people of color. Oliver, who is concerned about the safety of her children, is the sorority's the social action chair and vice president of the Pyramid Foundation of Tennessee.

Kenya McGruder, a fellow organizer and member of the Urban League of Middle Tennessee, said another reason for hosting the event is to address hesitance and concern in local communities of color after historic precedents like the Tuskegee Experiment for decades — as late as the early 1970s.

"The difference is that we've had a seat at this table," McGruder said. "We have been in the lab creating the vaccine. This is not an experiment."

In 1932, approximately 600 men, mostly poor and illiterate sharecroppers from Macon County, Alabama, enrolled in a study known secretly as "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male." Researchers told men participating in the study — 399 had syphilis — they were to be treated for "bad blood," a term used at the time to describe a host of diagnosable ailments.

While there were no proven treatments for syphilis when the study began, penicillin became the standard treatment in 1947. Yet the medicine was withheld as a part of treatment in order to track the disease's full progression.

This continued until a news media report in 1972.

Stacy Windrow, whose husband is the pastor at Olive Branch, said the decision to host the event was an easy call.

"We continue to open our doors to opportunities to help others in our community," Windrow said. "Seeing people like yourself do it and thrive encourages, 'OK, well I can too.'"

The vaccination site will have a translator and workers with the Department of Health who will be able to check eligibility for booster shots.

Darby McCarthy, a student at Middle Tennessee State University and former winner on Wheel of Fortune, is interning this fall at the Daily News Journal. She can be reached at dmccarthy@nashvill.gannett.com.

Rutherford County COVID-19 Vaccine Drive

Where: Olive Branch church (1115 Minerva Drive in Murfreesboro)

When: Saturday, Oct. 23 (noon - 3 p.m.)

Hosted by: Rutherford County Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., Urban League of Middle Tennessee, Pyramid Foundation of Tennessee