



Shamari Roberson, the Florida Department of Health's deputy secretary for health, told reporters Wednesday that just 658,000 Black Florida residents are fully vaccinated, adding that "we have a lot of work to do." | AP Photo/Lynne Sladky

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## 'Unacceptable': Only 7 percent of vaccinated Florida residents are Black

By **MATT DIXON** 05/12/2021 01:48 PM EDT

TALLAHASSEE — Just 7 percent of the roughly 9 million people vaccinated for Covid-19 in Florida are Black, a figure that has Gov. Ron DeSantis administration officials and advocates pledging to do more to boost vaccination rates in Black communities.

Shamari Roberson, the Florida Department of Health's deputy secretary for health, told reporters Wednesday that just 658,000 Black Florida residents are fully vaccinated, adding that "we have a lot of work to do."

She gave her comments during meeting of the Statewide Coronavirus Vaccination Community Education and Engagement Task Force, a panel of faith, community and medical leaders formed in January with the goal of getting between 60 and 70 percent of people of color in Florida to take the vaccine.

More than four months later, however, Roberson told the task force that only about 20 percent of Florida's overall Black population has gotten the vaccine. About **38 percent** of white non-Hispanic residents have been vaccinated in the state.

"So even though you look at the overall big picture, we still have a lot to do in order to get to the concept called herd immunity to get to a point where we can resume life," she said.

During the meeting, task force members shared ideas to get Black residents vaccinated, including using phone banks, hosting community block parties and deploying trusted community ambassadors. They also discussed the role of disinformation about the vaccines.

"There are people that are making millions of dollars by convincing people 'don't get a vaccine, do my thing, buy my product, wear my special thing, etc.," said Daniel Van Durme, a professor with the Florida State University School of Medicine. "That's disinformation. Stuff that is deliberately wrong."

Tallahassee Rev. R.B. Holmes, who leads the task force, pointed to specific comments made by Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) last week on a conservative radio show questioning the safety of vaccines.



“I don’t want to get too political, but I saw a Senator from Wisconsin saying he does not believe in these vaccines,” Holmes said. “And some people in the white evangelical community are also noncommittal. But we just have to be positive, stay focused, and keep our eye on the prize.

The issue of boosting vaccination rates in Florida’s Black communities is not new. In February, when just 5 percent of the 1.7 million vaccinated were Black, Holmes [sent an outline](#) of how to better reach minority communities to DeSantis’ office. Holmes said he never heard back.



Later that month, [DeSantis opened up six vaccination sites](#) in underserved communities across the state, a step at the time that was seen as helping address racial disparities in vaccinations. Around that same time, the Biden administration opened FEMA-backed vaccination sites in underserved communities.

State Rep. Omari Hardy (D-West Palm Beach), a Black progressive lawmaker who is running for the open congressional seat left vacant after Alcee Hastings died, urged DeSantis and his administration to work harder to reach communities of color.

“Gov. DeSantis and the folks around him need to move heaven and earth to get vaccines to the black community, and as they do this I don’t want to hear them blame their inability to equitably distribute the vaccine to people of color on vaccine hesitancy,” he said.

The percentage of vaccinations in Black communities, however, continues to lag white Floridians who are getting the vaccination.

“In the state of Florida, it’s somewhere around the ratio of two to one in terms of people of color versus Caucasians,” said Larry Robinson, president of Florida A&M, a historically black college in Tallahassee. “That’s unacceptable.”

Robinson, a task force member, said of those getting shots at a regional vaccination site at Florida A&M, about 60 percent are Black.

“Anybody can come and we encourage that, but it looks like it’s getting to that demographic that we all care about here that has been disproportionately impacted,” he said.