

Who is getting the vaccine? Disparities persist.

By DAVID FLESHLER and CINDY KRISCHER GOODMAN
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Ketley Joachim sits with her mom, Suzanne Noel, 97 from North Miami Beach after she received her vaccine during an interfaith

COVID-19 vaccination drive at the Aventura Turnberry Jewish Center in Aventura Florida hosted in partnership with a mosque and Black churches on Thursday, February 4, 2021 (Mike Stocker / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

The COVID-19 vaccination rate remains low among Black and Hispanic Floridians despite initiatives announced by Gov. Ron DeSantis to bring more shots to underserved communities.

Now, the federal government has stepped in. The Federal Emergency Management Agency plans to open [four mass vaccination sites in Florida](#) with one at Miami Dade College's North Campus and the others in Orlando, Tampa and Jacksonville. Around each site, two mobile units will go into nearby underserved areas and give out 500 vaccinations a day.

The mobile units are the latest effort to address a stubborn disparity in the distribution of COVID vaccinations in Florida. With about 2.5 million vaccines given so far, 10 percent of white Floridians have been vaccinated compared to just 4% of Blacks and 4% of Hispanics. That disparity is even starker in Palm Beach County.

The inequity affects everyone in the state.

Florida must reach a place where enough people become immune to the disease to curb the spread before stronger variants of the virus emerge. To get there, all groups must be vaccinated, particularly the Black community in which individuals are infected with COVID-19 at nearly three times the rate of white Americans, according to the National Urban League.

“We are not getting vaccinated fast enough or sufficiently enough,” said Dr. Kitonga Kiminyo, a Black infectious disease doctor in Palm Beach County.

In early January, faced with evidence that Black Floridians constituted such a small percentage of those getting vaccinated, the governor announced vaccination sites would be set up at churches in minority communities. Later, after criticism that funneling vaccinations through Publix stores would neglect poor neighborhoods, he directed the establishment of a vaccination clinic in Pahokee. This week, the Division of Emergency Management and Florida A&M University announced a state-supported vaccination site will open at the historically black university in Tallahassee.

“We still have a long way to go,” said Dr. Kiminyo, COVID-19 Task Force Lead for T. Leroy Jefferson Medical Society, an organization calling for more vaccination in the minority communities. “We need to vaccinate more of those at the highest risk, the disproportionate number of Black and brown people admitted to hospitals with COVID and who suffer more complications.”

The state’s track record

DeSantis says he has held events at 51 places of worship statewide and administered more than 42,000 vaccines through these one-day vaccination clinics.

But South Florida black leaders say the state needs to do much more than hold pop-up vaccination events at churches to stop the spread of COVID within communities of color that have been disproportionately harmed by the pandemic. While DeSantis travels through the state announcing vaccination sites where thousands of seniors at a time can be vaccinated, none have been in minority communities.

Earlier this week, the T. Leroy Jefferson Medical Society and other minority organizations in Palm Beach County sent a letter to DeSantis asking him to expand the availability of the COVID-19 vaccine to underserved and vulnerable communities. They want permanent vaccination clinics in Palm Beach County’s underserved communities.

“Those sporadic events are not enough,” Dr. Kiminyo said. “We need to set up mass vaccination sites and we need mobile vaccination sites in these communities to get to people who need it. That effort should be based on zip codes of patients who are the highest risk.”

Earlier this week DeSantis [**stood behind his controversial decision**](#) to set up a vaccine pop-up clinic that only serves residents of two wealthy zip codes in the Lakewood Ranch subdivision near Sarasota. Now, Black leaders say they want the same kind of exclusive vaccination sites, adding that people show up at Black churches from other communities.

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“Those points of distribution need to be closed to only people in those communities,” said state Rep. Omari Hardy of West Palm Beach.

Hardy said he has asked for permanent vaccination sites in minority communities in South Florida and awaits a response from the state. “If we are going to do this it should be done on a regular basis. Publix is getting 20,000 doses a week in Palm Beach County. Those doses are coming to Publix on a regular basis. If we are going to use churches as points of distribution, then vaccine needs to be flowing regularly to these communities and that’s how you are going to get these vaccination rates up.”

Access not the only obstacle

While access to vaccines is a concern, it is not the only barrier to increasing vaccination rates of Black and Hispanic Floridians.

Sue Jones of Palm Beach County's Black Nurses Association said the vaccine rollout is stacked against the poorer residents of the state.

“Residents with the time, computer systems and transportation are going to get the vaccines more than people of color, some who work two jobs and don't have the Internet,” she said. “That is the reality.”

Misinformation and distrust play a role, too. According to a recent [Kaiser Family Foundation poll](#), about 35% of Black Americans said they don't plan to get the vaccine, citing fears about safety and concerns that the vaccines are so new. The poll found half of Hispanics are skeptical of getting vaccinated, compared with only 26% of the white population who said they definitely would not get it.



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“We need to increase trust through education,” says Sheila McCormick of Essential Community Health, a nonprofit organization in Broward County that promotes fair access to healthcare. McCormick said she and a group of black doctors are going

into communities with high COVID positivity rates, educating people on what's in the vaccine and explaining how it could save their lives.

The problem, she said, is once they are convinced, the vaccine needs to be accessible. “At the heart, it's knowing where to get the vaccine and having a way to get there.”

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Earlier this month, Ketley Joachim drove a half hour in traffic across Miami-Dade County to get her 97-year-old mother, Suzanne Noel, a COVID vaccine. Noel learned about the opportunity through her church in Miami Gardens and easily convinced her mother, born in Haiti, to get vaccinated. “She's been staying indoors for the last year. Now she can finally go out.”

Leslie Beitsch, a professor of health policy and public health at Florida State University, said Florida needs to be vaccinating the Black and brown communities at higher rates than whites because the pandemic has placed a disproportionate burden on them in terms of deaths and hospitalizations from COVID.

Beitsch noted that among Blacks “there is a distrust of the medical community that is justifiable. But (Blacks) need to be targeted for much more outreach than we are doing.”

where to sign up

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