

# Why Engaging the Medical Neighborhood May Be the Key to Higher Vaccine Confidence

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*By: Katherine Herring Capps, Co-Founder & Executive Director, [The GTMRx Institute](#), a catalyst for change that brings critical stakeholders together, bound by the urgent need to get the medications right.*



Many public health experts believe that it will not be until at least 70 percent of Americans are vaccinated or have been infected with the virus and developed natural immunity, before the nation will have beaten the COVID-19 pandemic. CDC Director Rochelle Walensky says that national vaccination efforts “are the key tool that will help bring an end to this devastating pandemic.”<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, Axios-Ipsos polling indicates 20 percent of Americans are firmly opposed to COVID vaccination.<sup>2</sup> Time will tell if the recent Johnson & Johnson vaccine pause will push those numbers higher.

Building vaccine confidence requires proactive, thoughtful, and accurate grassroots public awareness and education with involvement of a broad spectrum of community stakeholders within a “Medical Neighborhood.” These “Neighbors” are plentiful: physicians, nurses, pharmacists, faith-based organizations, public health and safety officials, employers, local government leaders, schools, and veterans’ and military organizations such as the National Guard. Together with still others, these trusted community members can work to engage people who lack vaccine confidence, hear their concerns, lay out the facts as clearly as possible, and work to boost vaccine uptake in their area.

Here are four ways that harnessing the power of this Neighborhood will make a difference:

## **1. Recognize the Web of Worries**

Vaccine apprehension has existed for ages, but COVID-19 vaccine concerns are more complex than traditional anti-vax beliefs. The streamlined and accelerated vaccine development and approval process to stop this pandemic have increased broad-based skepticism. Objections are rooted in side effect fears, apprehension due to historical experiences such as the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, fear of deportation due to registration required at vaccination sites, political rhetoric, cultural norms prohibiting vaccination, religious beliefs that oppose the use of STEM cell



tissue for science, and limitless vaccine and COVID misinformation spurred by social media. The Kaiser Family Foundation Vaccine Monitor Dashboard shows distinct demographic differences between those comfortable with receiving a COVID-19 vaccination and those who are not. Those among White Democrats 65 and over have the highest degree of confidence, while hesitancy is at its highest among 30 to 49 year old White Republicans. Rural residents are significantly less confident in vaccination than city- or suburban-dwellers.

Local leaders from the Neighborhood are ideal to bridge the understanding gap and accelerate confidence. Analyzing the broad spectrum of barriers to develop specific strategies that address each should be the basis for all vaccine confidence boosting efforts. Only by understanding the barriers, can we overcome them.

## **2. Create Messages That Resonate Locally**

Vaccine concerns are wrapped in emotions. With first-hand knowledge of local residents' specific worries, objections and emotional needs, the Neighborhood can tailor discussions accordingly. For example, community physicians and pharmacists, faith-based organizations, social service groups, and employers are ideal vaccine educators able to position vaccines as avenues to advance health equity in areas hardest hit by COVID. In locales where acting in the best interest of family is a central motivator, vaccination can be positioned as something to do not for oneself but for loved ones. Local leaders know best what is at the actual heart of their community.

## **3. Recruit A Trusted Corps**

Relevant messaging is only the start. For greatest impact, this communication must be trumpeted by a credible corps of messengers whose life and family goals mirror the audience's. Research indicates that physicians and pharmacists are overwhelmingly the most trusted allies for health information. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, nearly 90 percent of physicians (and nurses with graduate degrees) have been vaccinated or plan to be; this provides resounding personal endorsements of vaccines. Hispanic and Black groups rely on counsel from clergy more than White groups. In some cases it is local government, public health, community, and business leaders who have greater influence on public opinions. Also, the power of advice from famous athletes, actors, and social media celebrities cannot be ignored. It takes a broad range of Neighborhood leaders to deliver relevant messages that address each group's concerns and boost vaccine confidence across constituencies.

## **4. Ensure Consistency For Maximum Impact**

Consistent vaccine confidence messaging rooted in science, tailored to each audience, and disseminated by teams of health care professionals along with local religious, business, and civic

leaders creates a resounding call within a community. When trusted medical providers distribute literature with the same messages people see on signage in local businesses or hear at church or read on billboards, the Neighborhood is at work. These messages can traverse social media channels to reach 40 percent of those opposed to vaccines who claim social media is their trusted information source.<sup>3</sup> Joining the forces of a broad array of influencers who take part in layered community canvassing with consistently accurate messaging is how to reach each corner of our nation's cities and countryside. This Neighborhood is the most effective route to improved vaccine uptake.

GTMRx has convened the "[National Task Force: Building Vaccine Confidence in the Medical Neighborhood](#)," which will soon offer a broad set of recommendations to build confidence about vaccines and address vaccine hesitancy while offering guidance on steps that should be taken as quickly as possible. The operating premise of the task force is that this work requires forging partnerships nationwide among trusted Neighborhood leaders. Each of us is part of the herd and this effort requires us to join together as vaccinated individuals to lead us to the herd immunity that will end the COVID-19 pandemic.

*As executive director, Katherine Capps provides leadership by supporting GTMRx Institute's mission and goals. She establishes and manages relationships with stakeholders across the health care spectrum. As a GTMR Institute Founding Board member, she works alongside other board members and collaboratively sets the strategy for the growth and activities of the organization.*

*Katie has a long history of collaboration in multi-stakeholder environments. As Health2 Resources' founder and president, she and her team have helped more than 35 clients meet advocacy, policy, outreach, marketing and awareness goals. H2R was instrumental in the launch of the Patient-Centered Primary Care Collaborative, lending expertise for organizational development and marketing and communications.*

*She has served on the board of the Washington Adventist Health Foundation, the Institute for Health and Productivity Management (advisory board), the Healthcare Industry Access Initiative and Emmi Solutions. She has served on the board of the National Business Coalition on Health and its national advisory board, and on the NCQA purchaser committee. She writes on topics relating to quality, health care cost, market-based health care reform and the value of shared health information.*

<sup>1</sup><https://www.advisory.com/daily-briefing/2021/03/30/vaccine-data>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/axios-ipsos-coronavirus-index>



<sup>3</sup><https://gtmr.org/report-background-and-resources-to-build-vaccine-confidence-in-the-medical-neighborhood/>

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