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Coronavirus



Philly is trying to bridge vaccine gaps by targeting hard-hit neighborhoods. Finally, activists and experts say.

The city's outreach efforts are getting a significant boost in the coming month.

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Esperanza vice president of community organizing Quetcy Lozada (center) and Esperanza community outreach coordinator Jasmin Velez (right), help register resident Jeff H... [Read more](#)
YONG KIM / Staff Photographer

by Jason Laughlin and Jonathan Lai
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Given the opportunity to register for a COVID-19 vaccination from his front porch, Jeff Harris, 65, didn't hesitate.

"If you don't get it, you die," he said.

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Harris, who lives with his 90-year-old mother, is eager to be vaccinated. He's mostly stayed home during the pandemic, he said, and even tries to avoid going to the grocery store.

But until Monday, when community activists came to his door, he didn't know how to sign up.

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“Most people don’t have no internet,” Harris said of his Hunting Park neighbors. “They just don’t have a way to get through to schedule no appointment, man.”

Harris’ neighborhood and others that are home largely to lower-income Philadelphians of color have some of the lowest vaccination rates in the city, according to an Inquirer analysis of city-provided zip-code-level data. The 16 zip codes with the lowest vaccination rates in the city are dominated by residents of color. Those least-vaccinated zip codes also tend to be among those that have suffered higher case rates, hospitalizations, and deaths.

Meanwhile, the Inquirer analysis shows residents of the highest-income zip codes have been vaccinated at twice the rate of the lowest-income zip codes.



Esperanza vice president of community organizing Quetcy Lozada (right) and Esperanza community outreach coordinator Jasmin Velez prepare to register residents for vac ... [Read more](#)
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Public health experts say Philadelphia’s vaccination data reflect systemic disparities that have existed for decades and been made more stark by



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professor of epidemiology and biostatistics.

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City officials say the initial vaccine shortages made it hard to reach out to people in need, but as eligibility expanded so did their outreach effort. Now they are quickly adapting based on what worked, and didn't, in the early stages.

"All of the planning in the world inevitably changes once you get into a response situation based on the particulars of the situation," said James Garrow, a spokesperson for the Philadelphia Department of Public Health. "Every decision made by the city and health department in this pandemic has been made with the information available at that time, and in the interest of saving lives and protecting people."

The city has begun allowing [vaccinations without appointments](#), or through registration by phone, and now is assembling a team led by the woman who helped improve Philadelphia's participation rates in 2020's U.S. census. This week, the city announced a second clinic run by the Federal Emergency Management Agency at Esperanza Academy Charter



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Philadelphians are fully vaccinated.

“I’ve felt frustration right from the very beginning,” said Quetcy Lozada, of the North Philadelphia community organization Esperanza, which runs the charter school, who has gone door-to-door registering residents including Harris. “Whenever we’re talking about access, we should make sure that it’s reachable, that it’s attainable, not just by some of the population but by all.”

A predictable inequity

While vaccine hesitancy is real, its effect on vaccination rates in Black and brown communities has been overstated, advocates say. In fact, polls show [significant narrowing in racial gaps in vaccine hesitancy](#).

The bigger issue is access — to reliable information about the vaccines and how to get them.



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Public health experts and community advocates say that was a miscalculation. By not conducting a direct outreach campaign in person and by phone well in advance of the vaccine becoming available, inequities that have long divided the population also harmed the vaccination process.

“It was super predictable,” said Barber, the Drexel professor. “We’ve known that there’s going to be a vaccine at some point. This should have been priority planning.”



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“I don’t think it’s my place to try to convince them,” she said. “Our goal here is to make sure that they know that there’s access, and there’s access right in walking distance from their home.”

By day’s end, she had registered 60 people at homes and businesses in the area.



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