

# Vaccine First! Outreach and Engagement for the Homeless Community

**Louisiana Housing Corporation**

Special Achievement: COVID-19 Response

**HFA Staff Contact**

Barry Brooks

[bbrooks@lhc.la.gov](mailto:bbrooks@lhc.la.gov)

### **COVID-19: Reaching and Engaging Louisiana's Homeless Population**

The emergence of the COVID-19 vaccine at the beginning of 2021 marked a hopeful milestone during the pandemic as the world saw opportunity for recovery and rejuvenation. However, as more individuals received doses of the available vaccines, Louisiana state officials continued to report low vaccination rates in many of the state's vulnerable populations, especially residents experiencing homelessness. In response, the Louisiana Housing Corporation (LHC), leveraging grant funding from the Emergency Solutions Grant CARES Act, partnered with the Start Corporation. This Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) worked with the LHC to develop a statewide vaccination strategy and campaign, implement a vaccination ambassador program, and run several health fairs and events throughout the fall of 2021 aimed at increasing vaccination rates among Louisiana's homeless population.

To kick off the statewide campaign, the LHC and the Start Corporation began by developing a proactive plan, leveraging their respective knowledge of Louisiana communities and previous work with residents facing homelessness across the state. The resulting high-level plan outlined the strategy for targeting the state's homeless population in key geographic areas throughout Louisiana.

As LHC sought to reach this vulnerable, yet hard-to-reach population, the challenges faced by the COVID-19 pandemic continued to present themselves throughout the campaign. In the end, the statewide initiative saw great success through an ambitious strategy to educate and vaccinate Louisiana community members experiencing homelessness.

#### **A Case Study in the Making: Vaccine First!**

When the state vaccination program began in October 2021, most people experiencing homelessness reported they had already been offered the vaccine, demonstrating that access to the vaccine was not the underlying cause of low vaccination rates. So, to increase vaccinations, the LHC and the Start Corporation had to define new strategies that would educate and encourage vaccination.

The partners began by assessing their initial plans, which resulted in applying a more proactive approach that was modeled after existing non-vaccine programs used to reach homeless populations across the state. The new plan was based on the following strategies:

**Repeat Offerings:** Create trusted relationships by truly listening to concerns and answering questions, and repeatedly offer the vaccine.

**On-Site Vaccinations:** Bring the vaccine to people experiencing homelessness, who did not have time to travel to sites to obtain the vaccination.

**Flexibility and Creative Thinking:** Be creative and figure out what a person wants or needs as a way to create trust between the vaccine ambassadors and the homeless.

**Incentives:** Offer incentives to help bring people to the conversation to seriously consider whether they want to be vaccinated.

### **Proven Outcomes: Meet Charlie and Jerry**

In an effort to show the project's positive effect within the homeless population, vaccine ambassadors documented testimonies to demonstrate the impacts made and the effectiveness of the program.

Charlie is a 64-year-old man who recently started working for a real estate company doing odd jobs. A shelter worker where Charlie was staying told him about the \$50 gift card he would receive if he decided to get vaccinated – this encouraged Charlie to attend an LHC-led vaccination event at the shelter. After his vaccination, Charlie said he was glad he could finally see his grandkids and kids again and be around other people safely.

Jerry is a 72-year-old Vietnam Veteran and known vaccine champion within the homeless population. He attended one of the events to receive his booster shot after receiving two doses of the Moderna vaccine earlier in the year. Jerry was supportive to others in the line and encouraged those with reservations by sharing his story with the vaccine, offering himself as proof of its effectiveness and safety. Jerry shared his excitement for his booster vaccine because he knew it would help protect both himself and his family.

### **Measuring Success: Outputs and Outcomes for an Innovative Solution**

During the planning phase, the LHC and the Start Corporation understood that a successful program would be backed by a data-driven plan. The ability to build and adjust the strategy based on the data collected would allow this team to effectively target communities, develop goals, and performance indicators, as well as to establish a dynamic plan of action for implementation. The data collected was measured based on the following outputs that were tracked by the vaccine ambassadors.

#### Outputs Tracked

1. Number of vaccine engagements: An engagement is defined as an interaction where staff proactively talks to unvaccinated individuals experiencing homelessness with the intention of educating them on benefits of receiving the COVID-19 vaccine.

2. Number of distinct places touched by outreach: A place is defined as an encampment (regardless of size), a car where an individual/household is living, an agency, or any other place where the homeless may reside.
3. Number vaccines given: A vaccine given is defined by one dose of any COVID-19 vaccine, regardless of if the vaccine is part of a two-shot series, a single-dose series, or a booster.
4. Number of gift cards issued: A gift card should be for \$50 per dose including boosters.  
Note: Records were kept for each to help LHC identify gaps in geographical coverage.

### Intended Outcomes

- More people experiencing homelessness will understand the benefits of being vaccinated and protected from COVID-19.
- More people experiencing homelessness will be protected from the most extreme effects of COVID-19.

### **The Data Behind the Story**

The LHC reported that since October 5, 2021, through May 10, 2022, 1,320 vaccinations have been given to the homeless statewide.

The success of this program can also be seen in the following statistics:

- Number of vaccine engagements: 88 different vaccine engagements were recorded
- Number of distinct places touched by outreach: 33 distinct places in 11 different parishes touched by outreach
- Number of gift cards issued: 1,316 \$50 gift cards have been given

The effectiveness of the strategies has also proven to be successful:

- Over the course of seven months, progress has shown that the repeated offerings approach has helped people become more confident in choosing to be vaccinated.
- Data collected since October 2021 shows that on-site vaccinations have been a key factor for success. Sites and locations included feeding and meal sites, shelters, day centers, bus stations, libraries, parks, and large box store parking lots.
- Documentation taken since fall of 2021 shows that the homeless that have trusted their vaccine ambassadors are more likely to ask for their needs to be met in the future.
- The use of offering incentives has proven to be successful and has encouraged people to consider their choices.

**Visual Aids**

Distributed Program Flyer



Vaccine Site

