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FEATURED

## Virtual town hall aims to boost vaccine confidence

Evan Brandt [ebrandt@21st-centurymedia.com](mailto:ebrandt@21st-centurymedia.com) @PottstownNews on Twitter  
Jan 13, 2021

**The Importance of Vaccines:**  
**Building Trust within Communities of Color**  
**Virtual Town Hall**

*A conversation with local healthcare providers and community leaders*

 <p>John Harris Director, Verazon Moderator</p>	 <p>Valerie A. Arkoosh, MD, MPH, Chair, Montgomery County Board of Commissioners</p>	 <p>Nelly Jimenez-Arevalo, Executive Director &amp; CEO, ACLAMO Family Centers</p>	 <p>Stacey Woodland, Chief Executive Officer, YWCA Tri-County Area</p>
 <p>Richard Lorraine, MD, FACP, Medical Director, Montgomery County Office of Public Health</p>	 <p>Irene Shepherd, CPNP, Chief Medical Officer, Community Health &amp; Dental Care</p>	 <p>Jonathan Corson, President, Pottstown NAACP #2288</p>	 <p>Meghan Smith, MPH, Planning &amp; Promotion Coordinator, Chester County Health Department</p>

**Tuesday, January 12 at 5:30 PM**



**For more information and to register:**  
[pottstownfoundation.org/townhall](http://pottstownfoundation.org/townhall)



POTTSTOWN — A vaccine can only stop a pandemic if people are willing to take it.



Concerned that there are doubts about the efficacy and safety of the new vaccines that have been produced in record time to battle the COVID-19 virus, area leaders held a virtual town hall Tuesday seeking to address those concerns.

Sponsored by the Tri-County Health Council and the Montgomery County Immunization Coalition, the panel paid particular focus to the need to get buy-in from the Black and Latino communities.

Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has said 70 to 75 percent of Americans will need to vaccinate to get the country on the road to normality.

Last month, Axios reported that "a Pew survey found that overall, 60 percent of respondents would definitely or probably take the vaccine if it were available today — up 9 points from 51 percent in September."

More worrisome, in October the Kaiser Health Foundation found "just 17 percent of Black American adults say they definitely will get a Covid-19 vaccine if it were determined to be safe by scientists and it was free; 49 percent said they would not get it."

Those numbers have improved since October, thankfully. "In November, a poll found that 70 percent overall (55 percent of Black respondents and 60 percent of Republicans) say they'd take the vaccine if public health officials say it's safe and effective," Axios reported.



Johnny Corson, president of the Pottstown chapter of the NAACP.

Image from screenshot

COVID-19 has harmed communities of color more than other ethnic groups, according to John Harris, a director with Veralon, a healthcare management consulting firm, who served as moderator.

"Our goal is to provide clear information," he said.

Johnny Corson, president of the Pottstown chapter of the NAACP, said 48 percent of Black residents know someone who has been hospitalized with the virus.

Nevertheless, 14 percent of the black population does not trust the vaccine, he said.



This is particularly true of older Black residents "who are familiar with the history of Black people being used for medical experiments," he said.

Stacey Woodland, CEO of YWCA TriCounty Area, said in her experience, those who "have a relationship with a medical provider will probably get the vaccine. Those who get their health care at the emergency room are going to want to know what it will cost" and may be less likely to be vaccinated.

Blacks, said Corson, are most likely to trust professionals of the same race. He noted that the first COVID-19 testing area was set up not in a community with a high minority population, like Pottstown, but at the community college in Blue Bell, an area many in Pottstown would have trouble accessing.

Weeks later, a testing site was set up at the county health department on King Street in Pottstown.

He said the challenge health leaders will face in getting Black buy-in for the vaccine "is overcoming mistrust and earning trust. It will take transparency, honesty, respect and time," Corson said.

Montgomery County Commissioners Chairwoman Val Arkoosh, who is also a medical doctor, said that the subjects on whom the vaccines were tested mirrored the actual percentage of minorities in Montgomery County.

Nelly Jimenez-Arevalo, Executive Director and CEO, ACLAMO Family Centers, noted there is reluctance in the Hispanic community as well.



Stacy Woodland, CEO of YWCA TriCounty Area  
Image from screenshot



Nelly Jimenez-Arevalo, Executive Director and CEO, ACLAMO Family Center.  
Image from screenshot



They want to know how safe the vaccine is, and whether it has been tested on other Latinos, she said. "They wonder about the information taken and they ask me if I go to get second doses, will immigration be waiting for me?"

Both Jimenez-Arevalo and Woodland talked about the importance of communication and language.

It's "critical to have cultural competency among medical professionals so they can address fears" in a given community, said Woodland. It's also best not to use too many "SAT words" because medical jargon can be off-putting and discourage participation in the vaccine program.

"The message is important, but for me, the most important person is the messenger," said Jimenez-Arevalo. It needs to be someone the community knows and can trust to have their best interests at heart, she said "and talk to people in a language they understand."

It's also important to meet them and get the message out in the places they have those conversations.

"Lots of times decisions are made not by people of color. It is important we deliver a sensitive message to our communities, using multiple platforms," said Jimenez-Arevalo.



Val Arkoosh, chairwoman of Montgomery County Commissioners.

Image from screenshot

That means knowing various social media sites used by different communities.

At the same time, its equally important to get accurate, verified information, said Arkoosh, who warned against getting too much information from questionable Internet sources.

"There is so much wrong information out there," she said.

One good place to get good information on the Internet is the Montgomery County web page dedicated to the coronavirus vaccines, she said.

She also warned that limited supplies of the vaccines are hampering vaccinations.



It may be spring before the county's younger, healthier population would be eligible to get the vaccine. "We just don't have enough," she said.

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**Town Hall with Montgomery County and the Pottstown Area Health and Wellness Foundation.**  
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Evan Brandt

@PottstownNews on Twitter

Evan Brandt has been a staff reporter for The Mercury for more than 20 years. He covers municipal, school district, political, state government, federal government and environmental news.

