

Shave And A Haircut, Two Shots: NY Salons Jump Into Vaccine Outreach



Willie Lightfoot

Walk into The Party Nail in early July, and you would have seen much more than buffed and polished toes, ready to take on the sidewalks of Mount Vernon.

The television mounted on the salon's baby pink wall played informational vaccine videos on a loop. COVID-19 pamphlets were piled high on owner Victoria Gasparro's workstation. As Gasparro told her clients about her experience receiving a shot, she engaged them in a game of vaccine trivia, focused on busting myths they'd seen on social media.

“Coming from a professional that they tend to see on a biweekly basis, there's this trust level that's been established,” Gasparro said. “The fact that I was not hesitant, me sharing my firsthand experience of the shot, how I felt before-after-during. I think it definitely inspired my clients to go and get vaccinated.”

Gasparro was just one of more than 250 barbershop and salon owners across New York and New Jersey participating in Shots at the Shop—a team effort by stylists, White House officials, local health departments and public health researchers to address vaccine hesitancy in communities hit hard by the pandemic. The New York State Division of Licensing Services, which regulates dozens of occupations, advertised the program to its cosmetology and appearance enhancement licensees earlier this summer.

Participating barbershop and salon owners receive a \$1,000 stipend if they attend a virtual class about COVID and vaccines, educate their clients about the process and host a clinic in or near their shop. The

effort is the latest in a long line of public health initiatives at salons and barbershops, which research suggests can reach people who might otherwise miss out on the benefits of preventative care.

“We’re not asking that you convince folks to get vaccinated, but simply that you ask people about the vaccines, answer common questions, and refer them to resources to help them make the best decision for themselves, their families and their community,” reads an email sent on June 18th to New York barbers and stylists by the state’s Division of Licensing services.

Gasparro backed up this sentiment and said she didn’t try to persuade anyone. She just answered their questions, addressed their concerns and sent them home with vaccine information to review at their leisure.

“I didn’t have a gun to anyone’s head,” she said. “Still the choice is yours. But you have the extra information to help.”



Monroe County Health Department workers prepare to administer COVID-19 vaccinations at New Creations Unisex Shop in Rochester, NY, on July 19th. Willie Lightfoot

Salons and barbershops have a long history as a focal point for health outreach, said Dr. Stephen Thomas, director of the University of Maryland’ Center for Health Equity. He has personally been studying the role of these public squares for decades. They’ve been called upon to deliver [blood pressure medication](#), [sex education](#) and information about [cancer screenings](#).

When the pandemic hit, it was only natural to share COVID and vaccine information there, hence why Thomas and colleagues developed Shots at the Shop.

“Trust matters, so why not go where people already have trust?” Thomas said. “That’s why we go to the barbershops and the beauty salons. It’s not just the message, but also the messenger.”

Thomas says this outreach is key to addressing health disparities affecting people of color, who have been hit especially hard by the pandemic. COVID put Black and Latino New Yorkers in the hospital at [nearly twice the rate](#) of their white or Asian counterparts. Black New Yorkers have the lowest vaccination rate citywide, with less than one-third fully inoculated. Just 42% of Hispanic or Latino New Yorkers can say the same, compared with 46% of white residents.

Willie Lightfoot, City Council vice president and owner of New Creations Unisex Shop in Rochester, said he was hesitant to get vaccinated at first. He and his wife read up on the shots before deciding to take the plunge, and he brought that experience to bear as a participant in Shots at the Shop.

“I was able to stand up and say, ‘I got this same vaccination. I was OK,’” he said. “I was able to be a credible spokesperson.”



*Barbershop owner Willie Lightfoot poses with Monroe County Health Department workers at New Creations Unisex Shop in Rochester, NY, on July 19th.
Willie Lightfoot*

After taking the virtual course, Lightfoot chatted with his clients about the reasons behind their vaccine hesitancy, ranging from misconceptions about the vaccine changing their DNA to concerns about medical racism. The latter has made some in his community distrustful of the government and the health care system.

“The barbershop created a safe space for them. A place of trust,” he said. “Barbershops, stylists, we help to build those bridges because they have trust in us.”

Lightfoot hosted a vaccine clinic in mid-July, complete with candy, raffles and prizes for people who chose to get vaccinated. Registered nurses and county health department workers were onsite to administer the shots and answer questions. Lightfoot advertised the event on social media, offering free haircuts and urging people to come down and learn more about the COVID-19 vaccines.

“They got their shot, they’re still alive, y’all,” he said in a [video](#) from the event, showing three vaccine recipients waiting during their 15-minute monitoring period.

“I’m still here!” one replied, laughing. “I’m number one!” said another.

All told, 10 people got their first shot during the event. Lightfoot says he hopes to get even more locals vaccinated during a follow-up event, scheduled for this month.

Not all stylists were as gung-ho as Gasparro and Lightfoot. One Manhattan salon owner, who asked that her name not be shared in order to protect her business, opted out of the program. She was worried it could cost her clients, particularly those who are adamantly anti-vaccine.

“We are artists,” said the salon owner, who added that she already has to smooth over tensions between vaccinated and unvaccinated clients. “We do hair. We don't want anything to do with medical experiences in the salon.”

Organizers estimate that salon participants have talked about vaccines to as many as 13,000 clients in New York and New Jersey.

Organizers estimate that salon participants have talked about vaccines to as many as 13,000 clients in New York and New Jersey alone. Even people who don’t immediately opt for the shot might choose to get vaccinated later thanks to a conversation with a barber or stylist, said Peter Holtgrave, senior director of public health infrastructure and systems at the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), co-organizer of Shots at the Shop.

“They are planting seeds and people are coming back and asking for more information,” he said. “And that’s something that’s hard to capture.”

Holtgrave says the organizers had aimed to recruit 1,000 barbershop owners nationwide in time for the Biden administration’s July 4th goal post of reaching 70% of Americans with at least one shot. They missed that deadline but the mission continues to schedule more vaccination clinics. They’re focusing now on states where the delta variant is causing the most havoc, including Alabama, Louisiana and Texas.

“As much as we value having those conversations, at the end of the day we want to protect these folks,” he said.