

Why barbershops are at the forefront of the effort to vaccinate Black Americans

From COVID-19 vaccines to mental health, officials see barbers as playing an important role in advancing public health.

In a barbershop in North St. Louis County, owner Randy Barnes listens as one of his barbers tells him that COVID-19 vaccines cause women to become infertile. That barber had previously sent him some links as evidence for his assertions.

“I looked at all the material that he sent, but I couldn’t find anything to back that up,” he says. Barnes talks to him, tries to convince him that the vaccines are safe. This one barber’s clientele are all young, he says, and none of them believe in the vaccine.

“Because this is a barbershop setting, you have to understand that everybody has a right to an opinion,” Barnes says. “The older generation—we just chime in and give them the facts about our experiences with the vaccine. Keep in mind we’ve all been vaccinated.”

Barnes owns one of 25 barbershops in North County that are participating in President Joe Biden’s Shots at the Shops effort, a [campaign launched in June](#) to get Black beauty shop and barbershop owners to educate people on COVID-19 vaccines. Posters advocating for vaccinating against COVID-19 line the walls of Barnes’s shop, where there are piles of pamphlets explaining what the vaccines do and don’t do. Then there are the conversations.

“I think it could probably start changing that age group’s minds,” Barnes says.

Public health officials have turned to barbershops in the past to roll out major campaigns against diabetes and hypertension, recognizing them as trusted places where information can reach people in ways that impact health outcomes. They need the help of these local institutions because some Black Americans reasonably don’t trust the medical establishment after a long history of abuse. Now, local shops are on the front lines of Biden’s drive to vaccinate more people.

Black Americans have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and yet comprise a smaller portion of vaccine recipients compared with their representation among COVID-19 cases. For example, in Georgia, Black Americans make up 35% of COVID-19 deaths (and 32% of the overall population), but only 19% of vaccine recipients, according to data analysis from the [Kaiser Family Foundation](#) for the week of August 4.

While access to vaccines is an issue for some Black Americans, Barnes says what he’s up against is misinformation.

“Disinformation travels around the world 100 times before the truth even gets its pants on,” says Damon Broadus, director of Health Promotion and Public Health Research for the St. Louis County Department of Public Health. He launched Sleeves Up St. Louis on July 19 as part of the Shots at the Shops initiative and is particularly concerned about reaching people between the ages of 12 and 30, who have lower rates of vaccination. “I was talking to someone with the Blues hockey team and he was saying that his daughter was literally sitting in front of him trying to put a magnet up to her arm

where she had just gotten the vaccine, thinking that it was going to stick, because that was something that she saw on social media,” he says.

Broadus is working to recruit more shops in partnership with several organizations including Shea Moisture, a personal care brand putting \$1 million toward training and supplying beauty salons and barbershops with the necessary educational materials. In addition to education, shops are hosting vaccination pop-ups. Broadus hopes to onboard 50 barbers and salons in the North County region. The St. Louis Department of Public Health is running a separate initiative, called Medical Moments, for which faith leaders are sharing messages to combat vaccine hesitancy.

There are signs of progress. Broadus says that in certain zip codes he’s seeing 1% to 4% increases in vaccinations every week at neighborhood clinics. “In four weeks, that’s 16 percentage points—in some zip codes, not all,” he says. “We’re not a monolith, so we have to try different communication points and have different conversations and allow for that candor.”

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The reason that Biden and others have engaged barbershops and beauty salons in this outreach is because they are trusted spaces in their communities. Public health officials have long known their value. “Somewhere over the years the Department of Public Health has recognized that network and has activated it for past public health campaigns,” says Dr. Sam Page, the region’s chief administrative officer. “It was a natural fit for vaccine outreach.” At a recent training event, he says 50 barbershop and beauty salon owners were in attendance.

Part of the reason that misinformation has been able to seep into Black communities is because of a well-earned distrust of public health. In the last 20 years, experts have come to realize that Black Americans [receive a lower quality of healthcare](#) than their white counterparts. There are also egregious incidents like the Tuskegee experiment that began in 1932—which baited Black men in Alabama with free healthcare and instead used them to study the impact of syphilis on the body—that have made many Black Americans distrustful of the medical establishment.

Lorenzo Lewis, founder of the Confess Project, calls this phenomenon “white coat distrust”—and he’s also turned to barbershops to combat it. Lewis has built a network of 400 barbers around the country who are trying to destigmatize therapy and create room to talk about mental health in their shops.

However, he says he’s concerned about how Shots at the Shops is being rolled out. He says that barbers in his network are frustrated because early on in the pandemic they were shut down and not considered essential businesses. “Now, that’s a controversy, because you’re using them to get people shots,” he says.

Lewis also doesn't see public health officials confronting the healthcare system's legacy with Black Americans nearly enough. Especially in the wake of a wave of police violence against Black Americans, he believes there need to be more conversations and opportunities to heal in order to get people on board with the vaccine and public health efforts in general. "We're dealing with a community that hasn't been seen, heard, or celebrated," he says.

Page agrees. "Part of building credibility is talking about those past tragedies in public health and the way the Black community has been treated over the years," he says, noting that Tuskegee is perhaps the most famous, but it's not the only example.

"We have town halls, small group meetings in churches, barbershops, and beauty salons, but they need to happen everywhere," Page says. "Some of those difficult conversations are about things that happened in the past that don't make us proud as a country or as a community. We have to recognize those and recognize them as things that were wrong."

Back at the barbershop, Barnes is hopeful that mixing in conversations about vaccines with sports banter and politics may nudge more young people to get vaccinated. But he says it's okay if he can't sway them. If they're going to say no to the vaccine, he just wants them to make an informed choice and not one based on whatever they saw on social media. And with time, he believes, they may come around.

"You have to remember that these younger folks, they respect the older generation," Barnes says. "You better believe they are listening and . . . you just have to keep educating them. Keep the information out there."