Guest Column: I was initially afraid to take the Covid vaccine, but losses changed my mind

I was initially afraid of the COVID vaccine. Growing up, I'd read about the unethical Tuskegee syphilis experiment, the illegal use of cervical cancer cells from Henrietta Lacks and the radiation experiments that left Vertus Hardimon permanently and painfully disfigured. On a personal level, I have experienced medical professionals placing misleading information in my medical charts to justify unnecessary treatment and interventions. All of these things made me skeptical of taking the COVID-19 vaccine even in the face of losing a close family member to the virus. But then I lost more family members. People who had direct impacts on the woman I am today. People I loved deeply, and I could not bear it. It was their deaths that made me reconsider the vaccine. But it was the fact that we could not grieve together that convinced me that getting the vaccine was what I needed to do to get back to some semblance of normalcy. Getting the vaccine was also what I needed to do to spare my family the heartache of having to repeat the isolated grieving process in the event of my untimely death. I implore you — if you are skeptical, please get vaccinated.

As COVID continues to ravage our Northeast Florida community, vaccination rates in our area remain lower than some other parts of the country and many of those are people of color. It is paramount to address the root cause of vaccine hesitancy amongst people of color. There must be intentional reconciliation efforts between our government, systems of care and communities of color where true acknowledgment of grotesque malpractice is coupled with intentional work to repair, restore and, in many cases, gain trust on all sides. The challenge we face is that we are currently in crisis and we have no foundation of trust. We must swiftly find a way to come together as people of all races to fight the COVID virus. If you have questions about the vaccine, please contact a medical professional and learn about the newly FDA-approved Pfizer vaccine — then get vaccinated.

This virus has affected areas other than public health. We have seen how the pandemic has disrupted our supply chain leaving many stores with empty spots on shelves. The hospitality industry is struggling to find employees, many women have been forced to quit their jobs to care for their children, and our children are experiencing serious disruptions in their education. This has been especially pronounced for students of color. As we debate the usefulness of masks in schools, our children are caught in the middle. Equally detrimental is the fact that our children are watching us perpetuate the myth that what is good for me eclipses what is best for us all. Please wear a mask and get vaccinated.

How might this moment of fighting over vaccinations and/or masking (in the absence of medically necessary exemptions) come back to haunt us if we cannot find a way to elevate the collective over individualism? How has it already impacted us? How many social ills can we expect to combat if we are unwilling to arm ourselves appropriately to fight a common enemy? How many could we solve if we were willing to work together? I am a fully vaccinated, Black mother of three young children who wears a mask, because in addition to wanting to protect the people I love, I want to do my part to protect the people you love and the people who love you! I'm pleading with you to do the same.

Dr. Kimberly Allen, CEO of 904WARD