‘The difference between life and death.’ Black leaders step up vaccine campaigns as Delta variant hits the unvaccinated

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS - JUNE 05: Eddie Stowe gets a COVID-19 vaccine from Amanda Kohler-Gopen at the It's Official Barbershop in the West Englewood neighborhood on June 05, 2021 in Chicago, Illinois.

Scott Olson/Getty Images/FILE

CNN —

Jeniffer Hall was hesitant to get vaccinated until early July when a Detroit pastor convinced her that she needed the shot to protect herself and her brother – who she has cared for since he suffered an aneurysm – from Covid-19.

After surviving Covid-19 herself in 2020, Hall said she decided to follow the science instead of listening to her adult children who say the US government can’t be trusted.

“The way I felt when I had Covid was the weakest I had ever been and I don’t want to experience that anymore,” Hall said. “I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy.”

Hall, 43, was vaccinated at a weekly clinic hosted by Rev. Horace Sheffield who has worked since December to combat vaccine hesitancy and get shots in the arms of Black residents at his community center. Now, with the highly contagious Delta variant spreading, Sheffield and other community leaders and health advocates are pleading for Black Americans to get vaccinated to prevent further devastation in an already vulnerable population. They are launching campaigns, planning and promoting more vaccine clinics and even partnering with hair salons and barbershops with hopes of reaching more Black people who remain skeptical about the shot. Some leaders say they are struggling to dispel myths and misinformation about the vaccine that continues to spread in the Black community.

Black Americans are the least vaccinated demographic group, according to the Centers for Disease Control, which estimates that 25% of the Black population in the US is fully vaccinated. Of the US population that is fully vaccinated, only 9% are Black. However, this data is incomplete – the CDC reports that race and ethnicity data is available for 68% of people who are fully vaccinated.

But swaths of the Black population aren’t the only group buying into misinformation about the vaccine. Studies show a significant number of Evangelical Christians are opposed to getting vaccinated for Covid-19. The anti-Covid vaccine sentiment among Evangelicals is fed by a mixture of distrust in government, ignorance about how vaccines work, misinformation and political identity, experts say. A disproportionate number of White rural Americans have also refused to get the vaccine.

The White House’s push for more Americans to get vaccinated amid the recent spike in Covid cases has led to political strife between President Joe Biden and Republican governors. Biden has blasted GOP governors in Florida and Texas for standing in the way of mask and vaccine requirements.

“I say to these governors: Please help. But if you aren’t going to help, at least get out of the way,” Biden said during remarks about the pandemic on Tuesday. “The people are trying to do the right thing. Use your power to save lives.”

The Biden administration has also expressed frustration with media coverage around breakthrough infections saying outlets have wrongly suggested that vaccinated Americans are just as likely to spread the disease as unvaccinated Americans. Vaccinated Americans actually have a far lower chance of becoming infected with the coronavirus and, thus, they are responsible for far less spread of the disease.

A ‘persistent’ fight

Sheffield said he recently partnered with four local churches to host vaccine clinics and testing sites with a goal of connecting with more Black people who still need the shot. So far this year, Sheffield has vaccinated more than 2,000 people at his community center.

He said pastors need to double down on their efforts to reach the Black community and continue to promote the science behind the vaccine.

“I’m not tired yet, we are talking about the difference between life and death,” Sheffield said. “And I’ve had some impact on people who refused to (get vaccinated) and then did it. And I say it’s not just about you, it’s the people you love who can get exposed.”

Some groups that formed to fight the pandemic’s impact on the Black community say they too are not ready to give up.

Dr. Reed Tuckson, co-founder of the Black Coalition Against COVID, said much of the ongoing hesitancy with Black people is fueled by distrust in White America due to racism in health care, voter suppression and disparities in the criminal justice system. There are also lingering myths such as the vaccine will interact with your DNA and impact fertility or that if people eat healthy they don’t need a vaccine, he said. National health leaders have dismissed all of these claims.

Tuckson said there is no silver bullet to overcoming the reluctance, but in recent months the coalition has boosted its efforts to reach more Black people with vaccine access and accurate information.

Coalition members are working with groups of formerly and currently incarcerated people to get them vaccinated. They have also collaborated with an NFL alumni group with hopes that iconic athletes can help build trust in the vaccine.

The Black Coalition Against COVID recently partnered with the White House to create an initiative called "Shots at the Shop" where hair salons and barbershops are recruited to host vaccine clinics and promote information about the shot. Hair salons and barbershops, Tuckson said, are "cultural hubs" and have a pulse on the Black community.

"This is a dogged, persistent determination to fight for each life at a time, day after day," Tuckson said. "We are totally focused… this has to be a love and compassion-based fight."

Mike Brown, kneeling in front, owner of The Shop Spa in Hyattsville, Maryland, hosted a vaccine clinic with local health professionals at his barbershop on May 17. More than 30 people were vaccinated that day.

Stephen B. Thomas

Mike Brown, owner of The Shop Spa in Hyattsville, Maryland, teamed up with local health workers in May and hosted a vaccine clinic at his barbershop with free food and music. Brown said he was able to persuade more than 30 people to get vaccinated, many of whom were reluctant to get the shot before that event. He plans to host another clinic this fall to combat the recent spike in cases.

Brown said he encourages his clients and neighbors to talk to their doctors, listen to the scientists and make educated decisions on the vaccine.

"We have been trying to get the correct information to the community because they are swimming in pools of misinformation and they're buying it," Brown said. "So I'm enlightening them on the facts and making sure they get the correct information that can battle their conspiracy theories."

Tuskegee descendants speak out

Studies have found that many Black Americans refuse to get vaccinated because of the nation's history of racism in medical research. Notably, the Tuskegee experiments from 1932-1972, recruited 600 Black men — 399 who had syphilis and 201 who did not — and tracked the disease's progression by not treating the men as they died or suffered severe health issues.

In an effort to combat vaccine hesitancy, descendants of the men involved in Tuskegee recently spoke out in a short form documentary for the Ad Council and COVID Collaborative's COVID-19 Vaccine Education Initiative.

In the documentary, the family members set the record straight on what happened, what has changed and how today's generation can build confidence in public health and the vaccine. Some of the descendants discussed their own decision to get vaccinated.

The Tuskegee study "is very different from what's happening with Covid-19," said Omar Neal, the former mayor of Tuskegee, whose uncle Freddie Lee Tyson was part of the experiment. "The vaccine is being made available to anyone who wants it even those who find themselves at the space of hesitancy. We have to have patience and give them the requisite information they need that they can make an informed decision."

Michelle Hillman, chief campaign development officer of the Ad Council, said the Tuskegee study is a “tragic part of American history.” The Ad Council has been promoting the documentary and its vaccine education campaign during events – including one in July at Howard University – and through Black-led organizations and media companies.

Hillman said she hopes the descendants can offer a trustworthy perspective on the vaccine.

“The messengers are just as important as the message,” Hillman said. “They really are the perfect messengers because they understood what happened and now they are making empowered choices and they want to help others.”

CNN’s Priya Krishnakumar contributed this report.