Collaborating with Faith Communities to Achieve Health Priorities
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Hesitancy. Lack of access. Lack of awareness. These are some of several factors in which prohibit or discourage individuals from receiving a vaccine and/or vaccinating their dependents. This issue was brought to the forefront in 2020 at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic with people being hesitant or unwilling to take the vaccine due to a variety of social and ideological beliefs or perceptions.

Ensuring everyone has access to vaccines and is willing to take the vaccine requires urgent, collective efforts by everyone in your community. This includes support from local leaders, community members, private businesses, and faith communities.

Who do your community members view as a trusted leader? Is it a religious leader? Educator? Sport coach? Government official? Social worker? Working with trusted, community-based leaders can play an active role in combating vaccine hesitancy and supporting accurate information sharing. In addition, ensuring collaborative efforts between all community members and entities is essential to support broader vaccination and health efforts in the short and long term.

Did you know that faith leaders are often viewed as the most trusted and legitimate leader in a community, often more so than federal government officials? Faith communities have always been at the forefront of addressing community-based challenges, especially those related to health and wellbeing. Therefore, collaborating with faith entities can be an effective tool to help support the general physical and mental wellbeing of our communities.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and building upon the extensive experience working with faith communities in health crises, several faith leaders came together to form the Faiths4Vaccines initiative at the onset of the pandemic. Faiths4Vaccines is an inclusive, multi-faith movement composed of local and national U.S. religious leaders and community members, as well as medical professionals, who are working together to identify and resolve current gaps in vaccine mobilization, outreach, and uptake. The initiative seeks to increase opportunities for faith-based institutions, particularly houses of worship, to engage and support in efforts to increase vaccination rates through the advancement of equitable vaccine distribution efforts and to combat vaccine hesitancy.

Faiths4Vaccines supports the empowerment of local religious leaders and communities to serve as trusted messengers within their community to reduce vaccine hesitancy and utilize their houses of worship as trusted locations for vaccination clinics. Faiths4Vaccines brought together different faith groups to not only help to increase vaccination rates, but also to increase the relationships between different faith communities to build social cohesion and support collaboration and preparedness for future crises.
Purpose of This Toolkit

This toolkit highlights key areas of consideration on how to create trust and collaboration between faith leaders and the broader community in efforts to increase vaccination rates and address other areas related to health services.

This toolkit will help you to identify:

1. Why it is important for faith leaders and communities to support vaccination efforts and broader health services.
2. How to collaborate with faith communities.
3. Additional resources on how to ensure faith communities and leaders are incorporated within your broader strategy and public health work.

Why Should You Engage Faith Communities in Public Health Efforts?

Faith Communities Have Already Supported the Community in Health-Related Efforts

With their deep-rooted connections to the community, addressing public health challenges through the support of faith leaders and communities is crucial. Faith communities have a long history of working alongside health authorities to support the health of the community. Throughout the United States, faith leaders and communities often serve as ‘responders’ when a crisis unfolds. From natural disasters to the COVID-19 pandemic, faith leaders are often in regular and direct contact with communities who are experiencing the crisis firsthand and can offer guidance on how to reduce its impact. This can include using their house of worship as a health clinic or food bank, offering educational classes, and providing counseling (psychosocial support).

As nearly every faith tradition is deeply rooted in service to the community, these leaders often support their community in responding to the crisis through their respective moral and religious values and teachings. Moreover, members of faith communities may turn to faith leaders as their first and primary source of information to address issues as it relates to vaccine access and hesitancy, especially when there is widespread misinformation.

They can positively contribute to larger public health campaigns by serving as trusted messengers to communicate important health information, provide temporary health sites during large onset crises through their houses of worship, and serve as sources of empathy and unity for impacted community members.
Faith Communities Can Serve as Trusted Messengers to Reduce Hesitancy

People of faith are frequently considered influential leaders in their communities and can serve as trusted messengers. In building upon their trust within the community, faith leaders can share messaging that builds the public’s trust in public health systems and vaccines. Confidence building amongst communities is critical – hearing messaging from a trusted source is a necessary component for people to understand and ultimately accept accurate information conveyed to them.

The teachings of faith leaders can also serve as a source of information, comfort, and guidance for community members. While the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in some feelings of distrust towards media and government entities, religious leaders typically remained trusted messengers who were able to inform their communities on accurate information relating to the vaccine and encourage them in recognizing the shared interest and mutual benefit from listening to health experts. For instance, many faith communities utilized examples from their respective religious texts/scripture to explain why receiving the vaccination was an act of ‘loving thy neighbor.’

The Faiths4Vaccines Get Vaccinated Toolkit includes information about the benefits of receiving the COVID-19 vaccine, how-to guidance on implementing programs, links to supportive resources, answers to the most common questions through a contextual theological lens, and sample social media posts to equip faith communities and increase confidence about vaccines within local faith communities.

Using Social Media to Increase Vaccine Access and Uptake

Social media is a great platform for advocacy efforts; it provides a cost-effective way to connect with others and promote a common cause. Throughout the pandemic, faith leaders shared images of themselves receiving the vaccine, while others utilized popular social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok to advocate for vaccine acceptance.

‘TikTok’ Rabbi Uses Social Media to Reduce Vaccine Hesitancy

Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld, a Rabbi in Washington, DC used social media to share his vaccination experience and encourage others to get their shot(s). After participating in a clinical trial for the COVID-19 vaccine, Rabbi Herzfeld shared his experience on TikTok. To date, his videos have received over 400k views. [Watch his video here.]

“The most important sermon we can give in our lives is to encourage our communities to get vaccinated.”

Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld, Washington, DC
American Baptist Churches USA Encourages All Persons to Receive the Vaccine

Secretary General of American Baptist Churches USA, Dr. Jeff Woods, drew on his faith and the teachings of the Bible to encourage all people to receive the vaccine. Watch his video here.

Houses of Worship Can Be Used as a Temporary Health Sites

Houses of worship are often well positioned in communities with strong local networks that can be quickly mobilized to assist in efforts to support vaccine administration and in other health areas. These facilities can sometimes be located in isolated rural areas where communities have difficulty accessing health facilities, such as pharmacies and hospitals, due to their distance from urban centers. Additionally, receiving a vaccine or other health services in a trusted, safe, and familiar space is an additional reason to use houses of worship. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many houses of worship opened their doors to serve as a testing or vaccination clinic.

Here is how faith communities used their spaces to support vaccination efforts:

Holocaust Survivors Receive Vaccine at Interfaith Clinic

In Florida, an interfaith vaccination clinic was held at Temple Beth El Synagogue, in collaboration with a local Methodist church and mosque. The effort initially derived from the need to vaccinate elderly members of the synagogue, some of whom were Holocaust survivors. Through collaboration with the Florida Division of Emergency Management, the three houses of worship and 15 religious organizations were able to register and vaccinate over 500 community members, a majority of whom were elderly and Holocaust survivors. The vice president of a collaborating synagogue stated it was, a “coming together of the community. When you see an interfaith assembly, bringing the community together, it really is encouraging.” He also believed that the number of people willing to receive their vaccine derived from religious leaders publicly receiving their vaccine at the event.

Supporting Immigrant Communities

More than 1,000 food and agricultural workers received their vaccine at The Sikh Center of the Pacific Coast Gurdwara, the house of worship for the area’s Punjabi population in Selma, California. Similarly, the ADAMS Center Mosque in Northern Virginia directly engaged in administering over 49,000 vaccines, with prioritization of immigrant and undocumented communities. Working in collaboration between local churches and synagogues, they continue to provide vaccination, booster shots as well as expanded to provide pediatric vaccinations to diverse members of their community.
Supporting Hearts and Minds: Bethany Baptist Church Becomes a Vaccination Clinic

“We really have to be fluid in this season, so that we can go beyond those barriers and reach everybody,” says Pastor H. Patrick Cason of Bethany Baptist Church in Norfolk, VA. In partnership with Chesapeake Regional Healthcare, Pastor Cason worked to provide his community with education and access to the vaccine.

In February 2021, the Church opened its space and started to serve as a vaccination site. The church’s logistics team worked hand in hand with the healthcare department to get everything in order for the vaccination event, including preparing the fellowship hall and designating volunteers to direct parking lot traffic and greet patrons. Pastor Cason also led efforts to provide reliable information on the vaccination and address the questions and concerns of his congregation. In the weeks leading up to the vaccination clinic, Bethany Baptist hosted an online event with a pharmacist and lifelong member of the church to answer questions and explain how the COVID-19 vaccine worked. The webinar was broadcasted over Facebook live as well as a conference call line for those without access to the internet/social media.

“\textit{We’ve always been a community outreach church in our 5-year history. I believe that the ministry of Jesus Christ is meeting the needs of the people. The efforts of Bethany Baptist Church serve as testament to the many ways faith communities are meeting the needs of the people as our nation responds and recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic}”

Pastor H. Patrick Cason, Norfolk, VA

Faith Communities Serve as Sources of Unity and Empathy

In some communities, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the spread of discriminatory attacks towards marginalized groups. This unfortunately is not only true of the pandemic but has also occurred with other health emergencies, including HIV/AIDS. Faith leaders and communities continue to serve as a source of unity and empathic understanding that allows for conversations and discussion that breakdown the existence of stigmas and barriers that may result from a misunderstanding of these health challenges.


As part of the Faiths4Vaccines initiative, prominent Christian, Muslim and Jewish faith leaders came together to explain how receiving the vaccine is an expression of love for one’s neighbors. This video was released on social media in conjunction with the holy holidays of Ramadan, Passover, and Easter. [Watch the video here](#).
Best Practices for Collaborating with Faith Communities

Faith communities can serve as excellent partners and leaders in supporting vaccination efforts. Here are key steps to begin your collaboration with faith communities!

1. **Identify faith communities in your area.**
   - Before you can engage all faith groups in your community, it is important to understand which faith communities exist. Begin by making a list of those communities that exist outside of your own faith tradition before reaching out.
   - Recognize that some faith communities have faced hardships and may be hesitant to collaborate. In the United States and many parts of the world, historically some communities have experienced challenges from interacting with health professionals and may not be immediately ready to collaborate and support health initiatives resulting from a general mistrust of institutions and government.
   - Identify a focal point to build and sustain the collaboration/partnership. Remember, it will take time to support trust-building efforts and build effective partnerships to best support your communities.
   - Be prepared to support trust-building efforts between yourself and the faith community. Trust goes both ways!

Strengthening Your E-Advocacy Efforts

*Are you looking to strengthen your social media engagement in order to reach and engage with your target audiences?*

Advocacy is the process of building support for a specific issue or cause and influencing others to act in order to achieve the desired change. Advocacy can take place on many levels, including locally, nationally, regionally, and internationally. E-Advocacy is instrumentalizing the advocacy process online, or in other words, online organizing.

*Click here to learn how to effectively utilize social media with the Faiths4Vaccines E-Advocacy Toolkit!*
2. Connect with your local faith communities.

- Approach the faith community, the house of worship, or designated leader of that faith center to schedule a meeting. As the goal of the conversation is to build trust, it is critical for the focal point to develop a relationship with the faith community.

- Plan to use the introductory meeting to establish a relationship between you and the religious leaders. Remember, trust is built through mutual understanding and empathy.

- Engage in regular conversations with faith leaders and community members. If they are hesitant to work with you or to support your vaccination efforts, take time to understand why they are hesitant rather than simply telling them to trust science or take your word for it.

- After the hesitancy is reduced, take time to explore common goals and visions you have for the community as it relates to overall health efforts. After identifying those goals, work to identify potential areas of collaboration.

- Continue to build and support ongoing dialogue and trust. One meeting is not enough to gain trust, so follow up and identify ways you can be involved with the house of worship.

While it may feel challenging if after the first meeting the group’s approach has not changed, it is important to remember that we cannot force people into a specific action even when we know that it is in their best interest and in the interest of the greater community.

Remember, the goal of this collaboration is to start by engaging with faith-based groups and leaders to build trust between you and the religious community and leaders. It is important to approach this with support and compassion so that communities connected to religious groups feel they can make these decisions by way of receiving respected and trusted communication.
What are some ideas for collaboration? The below is a suggested list based on approaches that have been conducted by faith communities in collaboration with health organizations and officials across the United States.

3. Ways to collaborate with faith communities.

- Launch social media campaigns and radio talk hours to communicate with different age groups within faith congregations. Teaching congregations about the role of caring for their health and their community health through webinars or events at the house of worship.
- Invite health practitioners to speak to the congregation to discuss ways to stay healthy.
- Provide transportation for elderly or individuals with disabilities to access vaccines at a medical site.
- Partner with faith medical associations such as Islamic Medical Association, the Catholic Medical Association, and many others.
- Speak with parents during religious schools or programs about the importance of adolescent health.
- Engage with youth and youth programs to speak with their peers and community members in ways that may resonate with strongly with their peers or family members.
- Educate the community on sanitation and other health practices to prevent the spread of viruses.
About Faiths4Vaccines

Faiths4Vaccines is an inclusive, multifaith movement composed of local and national U.S. religious leaders, as well as medical professionals, who are working together to identify and resolve current gaps in vaccine mobilization, outreach, and uptake. The initiative seeks to increase opportunities for faith-based institutions, particularly houses of worship, to engage and support the United States government in its efforts to increase vaccination rates through the advancement of equitable vaccine distribution and combat vaccine hesitancy. While the initiative's initial focus is at local and national levels in the United States, the partners are acutely aware, including through their transnational membership, of the parallel global challenges. Partners recognize the important links and lessons to advocacy and support in different countries, and especially among vulnerable communities.

Faiths4Vaccines sought to improve the capacity, resources and access of local religious actors to engage in domestic and international peacebuilding processes through pandemic response and recovery efforts and increase interreligious collaboration to increase mutual interreligious understanding. In 2021 Faiths4Vaccines has engaged with over 1000 faith actors, government officials and medical professionals across the United States. This engagement includes capacity building to utilize effective communications to disseminate messages across a community, advocate to the United States government to recognize and create meaningful engagements surrounding the role of religious actors in supporting localized initiatives and supporting social cohesion amongst interreligious communities.

Faiths4Vaccines is guided by a interreligious Core Group including, the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, Sojourners, World Faiths Development Dialogue, National Council of Churches, Union for Reform Judaism, National African American Clergy Network and the Islamic Medical Association of North America.

Additional Resources

The following are selected resources that provide additional information on how to engage with faith leaders on public health messaging related to vaccination campaigns.

Faiths4Vaccines testimonials from faith leaders: https://bit.ly/3MK1HR7


UNAIDS Strategic framework for partnership with FBOs: https://bit.ly/3GJFyhX


