

Battling Vaccine Hesitancy in African American Communities

OSF Physician Encourages African Americans to get the COVID-19 Vaccine

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), racial and ethnic minority populations have historically been known to experience a disproportionate burden of illness, hospitalization, and death during public health emergencies. The COVID-19 pandemic is no different. A recent [study](#) done by the Radiological Society of North America (RSNA) found that people from racial and ethnic minority groups are more likely to have increased COVID-19 disease severity upon admission at the hospital compared with non-Hispanic white people. This means an increased likelihood that these patients would need to be intubated, admitted to an intensive care unit (ICU), or potentially even die from the disease.

Dr. John Hobbs, an OSF Medical Group physician and assistant pastor at his church, is urging members of the African American community to get the COVID-19 vaccine when it is their turn to receive it. His message? Don't wait.

"I did get the COVID vaccine and did not experience any side effects as a matter of fact. Under the circumstances, I felt it was very important to set an example. As an assistant pastor of a church for 35 years now, I figured I need to set an example because it is much easier to go to people and encourage those who are reluctant to do so if you yourself have already done it. So it was a role model situation as much as a safety factor for myself," says Dr. Hobbs.

Because public health emergencies tend to effect the African American community more severely than non-minority communities – combined with other historical factors including the 1932 [Tuskegee experiment](#) – there is some hesitancy among African Americans to get the COVID-19 vaccine until it has been around a bit longer. In Illinois, people over age 65 became eligible to receive the vaccine last month and as a physician Dr. Hobbs feels it is important to vaccinate those who are eligible as soon as possible. However, he says that the approach taken to convince others to get it is critical – especially when encouraging those who are hesitant.

"Credibility is everything. You can't send caucasians into the African American community and tell a 65-year-old African American 'I have something for you that will protect you,' because there will be hesitancy. However, that does not necessarily go across the board because, for example, caucasians or non-people of color who practice medicine and have established a great rapport with their black clientele – those people will be more accepting of the recommendation," Dr. Hobbs explains.

In order to change the narrative, Dr. Hobbs feels it is important that he and others set an example for the African American community, and reiterate the message that the COVID-19 vaccine is safe, effective, and, ultimately, will help bring this pandemic to an end.

"We always open a sermon or preaching of the gospel by mentioning the vaccine. Because a number of reliable, accepted individuals who do preaching at the church are looked upon with honesty and integrity, we always open that way. One of the things we always say is, 'I got the vaccine and before we get started today, let's emphasize the fact that you need to get the vaccine as well' – because it's going to save your life. It is going to keep grandmamma safe. And that's who we worry about is grandmamma, grandpapa and potentially even parents," continues Dr. Hobbs.

If you or a loved one is eligible for the vaccine but you are still determining whether or not to get it, Dr. Hobbs says that the benefits far outweigh any risks – and the protection from severe illness due to COVID-19 complications is crucial.

"It can certainly keep you from getting severely ill and needing hospitalization and potentially even dying. We encourage everybody to get the flu vaccine for example simply because we know historically that it works."

Most importantly, because many COVID-19 vaccine appointments are made online – and community members who are currently eligible are seniors – Dr. Hobbs suggests helping the seniors in your life with making their appointment.

"There are a number of our senior African American clientele and individuals in the community who are not internet savvy or social media savvy. So I say to the younger generations, you know this stuff. Help your parents and grandparents. Go through the process and help them do whatever is necessary to get registered. If they get frustrated because either something gets delayed or was canceled at the last minute, don't allow their frustration to allow them to give up. Be persistent," Dr. Hobbs says.

To learn more about where and how to get the COVID-19 vaccine in Illinois, go to the [IDPH website](#).