

Sudders Likens Door-to-Door Vaccination Effort to Campaign

GOP's Mountain Reflects on Evolving View of Virus

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JUNE 3, 2021.....The vaccination distribution phase the state finds itself in as summer kicks off is almost like managing a political campaign, the state's top health official said Thursday.

"I think of this phase of vaccine distribution as being hyper-focused, hyper local, a ground game," Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders said at a virtual forum. "Think of it almost as like a political campaign but instead of political canvassing, we're vaccine canvassing."

Case numbers for COVID-19 are at a low not seen since the summer of 2020, the percentage of Massachusetts residents fully vaccinated is steadily climbing, and the state has officially rescinded nearly all of the restrictions put in place to help mitigate the pandemic.

But as even as officials express optimism toward the current state of the pandemic in the commonwealth, state and local officials are looking to hone in on residents who are still hesitant about getting jabbed with one of the several vaccines available to the public.

Massachusetts Health Policy Forum Chair Philip Johnston said now that the state has turned a corner from "vaccine scarcity to plentiful supply," the focus needs to shift to overcoming hesitancy issues in vulnerable communities.

"While the CDC reports that Massachusetts has one of the lowest vaccine hesitancy rates in the nation, we all understand that more work needs to be done to reach herd immunity in a new normal state in the commonwealth," Johnston said.

As of Wednesday afternoon, just over 3.6 million people in Massachusetts had been recorded as fully vaccinated. And as the state transition away from

relying on mass vaccination sites -- officials announced Thursday that all seven sites [would close](#) by mid-July -- Sudders said Massachusetts is taking a "hyper-focused" and "hyper-local" approach.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted communities of color, Dr. Anna Maria Siega-Riz said, due to the interplay of clinical characteristics and social determinants of health. That puts those communities at higher risk for contracting the virus, she said.

And when looking at the percentage of eligible individuals with at least one vaccine dose or fully vaccinated by county, there are disparities across the state. Siega-Riz presented data during the panel discussion that showed Hampden and Bristol Counties remain below 50 percent in each of the two categories.

She also described four groups of vaccine-hesitant people that are outlined in a [New York Times opinion piece](#) published in mid-May.

The first, described as "watchful," want to wait and see what happens with those who have already received a vaccine dose. The second, called "cost-anxious," want to receive a vaccine but feel they can't afford the lost wages associated with taking time off from work to get vaccinated.

The third group is described as "system distrusters" -- who feel the health care system does not treat them fairly. And the final group are "COVID skeptics," who don't believe the virus is a threat. The national average of COVID skeptics is about 14 percent, Siega-Riz said.

"The primary barrier for this group is the fact that they have deeply held belief disbeliefs about COVID. Everyone in this group believes in at least one conspiracy theory," she said. "Key to engaging in this group will be to avoid trying to debunk what they believe, but rather listen to them, acknowledge how they feel, and share the facts about the vaccine."

Sudders categorizes people who have not received a vaccine in Massachusetts into two groups: those who are "truly hesitant" and those who do not plan to get vaccinated at all, or what she described as "vaccine delayers."

"There are people who don't feel that sort of sense of urgency anymore, and we need to help them feel urgent," the secretary said. "Those delayers are the majority of the unvaccinated and that's where we see some of our biggest opportunity."

Department of Public Health Commissioner Monica Bharel said state officials looked at communities that experienced the highest burden of COVID-19 cases and deaths, compared that with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's social vulnerability index, and came up with a list of 20 communities where vaccine equity needed to be improved.

"Using that data-driven approach, we literally then work to reduce hesitancy by going door to door, knocking on doors similar to political campaigns," Bharel said. "We have been and continue to canvass in these 20 communities and using as our ambassadors and our messengers, people from the community so it's local voices talking to local voices."

Vaccine hesitancy also varies depending on political affiliation and age, said Massachusetts Republican Party Vice Chair Thomas Mountain.

"My political party and those individuals who are within it, there's a very high percentage who are reluctant to get vaccinated," he said during the panel discussion. Mountain described his attitude toward the virus as "nonchalant" until he was infected with COVID-19 after attending a White House holiday event.

"So coming from that perspective, I more or less, shall we say, saw the light and experienced the severity of the virus and the realization that I could have and actually thought that at some point I would actually die from it," he said.

In dealing with vaccine-hesitant individuals within the Republican Party, who he says are mostly middle-aged men, he attempts to employ several tactics. First, he notes that the creation of a COVID-19 vaccine was initiated under former President Donald Trump, "whom they followed, supported, and admired."

Second, he said he tries to reason with people by asking them if they would receive a vaccine for cancer should it become available.

"You would get a cancer vaccine if it were presented, but you won't get a Coronavirus vaccine, which not only is potentially lethal but is very, very contagious," he said. "So that sort of reasoning can appeal to some ... once they really step back and listen to it. "

Mountain also uses his personal experience with the virus to convince people to get vaccinated.

"Yes, I was nonchalant, and shall we say careless about getting the virus but I did get the virus and I got it severely. And I got it in a setting, in the White House by the way, which was, shall we say nonchalant."