

Protecting Vulnerable Populations:

Vaccinating Home Care Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In late 2020, the U.S. government approved highly effective COVID-19 vaccines. Health care workers, including more than 130,000 home care workers in New York City (NYC), were among the first people eligible for vaccination. Home care is an essential part of NYC's health care system, helping older New Yorkers and New Yorkers with disabilities live more independently. Since a strong home care workforce helps hospitals that are overwhelmed during emergencies, and home care workers were at especially high risk for COVID-19 at the height of the pandemic, vaccinating home care workers early on was urgent.

However, NYC's home care workforce faced significant barriers to vaccination, including:

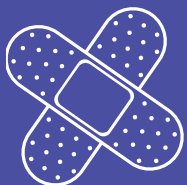
- ✓ They did not have a centralized location to get vaccinated because their work involved visiting patients at their homes.
- ✓ They receive lower wages than other health care professionals, making it harder for home care workers to take time off or use personal resources to get vaccinated.
- ✓ Many home care workers are women of color with limited English proficiency, inequitable access to health care services, inflexible schedules, limited transportation and less time to schedule web-based appointments.

Very few home care workers could get vaccinated at the beginning of NYC's vaccine rollout. One union had a waitlist of 2,500 home care workers seeking vaccination. Workers with limited English proficiency reported long wait times on the phone, finding no available appointments and giving up. Meanwhile, as more workers got COVID-19, fewer were available to care for patients at home.

In February 2021, the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYC Health Department) met with various groups to learn about barriers to vaccine access and create strategies to vaccinate health care workers. The NYC Health Department learned that health care workers needed:

- ✓ A wide selection of vaccination sites distributed throughout NYC
- ✓ Vaccination sites that were accessible by public transportation
- ✓ Appointments available in the early morning, late at night and on the weekend to accommodate their 24/7 work schedules

In response, the NYC Health Department launched two initiatives to increase vaccination among home care workers:



A vaccination site for home care workers was opened in Brooklyn in March 2021, with 100 appointments available per day. Through a public-private partnership, vaccination of home care workers was expanded to other clinics across NYC.



Seven large home care agencies and two home care worker unions were enrolled into the NYC Authorized Scheduler Program so they could register home care workers for appointments (20 per day) at vaccination sites in the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens.

Separately, the NYC Health Department created a contact list of home care stakeholders representing over 300 home agencies, including smaller home care agencies and nonunionized workers, to share timely vaccine information. This made it possible to update home care stakeholders on vaccine sites and availability as well as promote webinars to address vaccine hesitancy and improve infection prevention.

These programs and other supports from the City helped thousands of home care workers get vaccinated against COVID-19. In turn, vaccinated workers were better able to protect their own health and prevent transmission to family members and patients.

In summer 2021, the NYC Health Department pivoted to strengthen the ability of the home care sector to respond to future emergencies. This effort would not be possible without funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response's Hospital Preparedness Program (HPP). Leveraging this resource, the NYC Health Department contracted with two home care associations representing over 70% of home health care workers in NYC to build emergency preparedness capabilities. This engagement included a first-of-its-kind needs assessment of the readiness of NYC's home care sector to identify gaps in emergency management capabilities and compile lessons learned from the pandemic. Findings have informed how the NYC Health Department can support the preparedness of home care agencies and help the NYC health care system respond in case of future emergencies.



Up-to-date vaccination remains an essential tool to protect health care workers. For the latest information about COVID-19 vaccines, visit nyc.gov/health/covidvaccine.