



**Statement for Hearing on
“Building Trust and Battling Barriers: The Urgent Need to
Overcome Vaccine Hesitancy”**

**Submitted to the
Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis**

July 1, 2021

Vaccinations are an important and cost-effective way to prevent disease and avoid serious and potentially life-threatening complications, including those resulting from the interaction of a dangerous illness and one or more preexisting health conditions. Vaccinations also play a critical role in stemming the spread of diseases, protecting the health of Americans and their communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has further demonstrated the critical role that vaccines play in safeguarding people and improving public health.

AHIP appreciates the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis for recognizing the importance of vaccines. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published data showing both the health benefits and economic value of vaccinations.¹ The CDC estimates that, because of vaccines, 21 million hospitalizations and 732,000 deaths will be avoided among children born between 1994-2013. Additionally, the CDC estimates the nation will save nearly \$295 billion in direct costs and \$1.38 trillion in total costs because of the vaccines provided to children born over the same 20-year period.

Health insurance providers have long worked together with physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and public health officials to increase vaccination rates in children, adolescents, and adults. Since the inception of the COVID-19 emergency, health insurance providers have dramatically increased those efforts. Insurance providers have worked hard to educate parents about the need to keep their children’s immunizations current, have engaged older adults to remind them of the need to obtain vaccinations important to their health and wellbeing such as influenza and pneumonia and, as COVID-19 vaccines increasingly become available to more Americans, insurance providers continue to engage, educate, and break down social barriers to encourage everyone who is eligible to obtain a COVID-19 vaccine.

¹ *Report shows 20-year US immunization program spares millions of children from diseases*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 2014. <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2014/p0424-immunization-program.html>

Despite abundant evidence that vaccinations are safe, effective, and critically important to the health of our communities, barriers persist and must be addressed. We appreciate the opportunity to share our recommendations and solutions with the Select Subcommittee as you explore this important issue.

A Better Approach to Improving Adult Immunization Rates

Vaccines save lives, and health insurance providers are working every day to build confidence in vaccines and to ease access to them.

In 2015, AHIP facilitated the “National Vaccine Roundtable” which brought together 40 key stakeholders to identify barriers to and make recommendations for increasing adult immunization rates. The roundtable was AHIP’s contribution to the Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS) National Vaccine Program Office’s development of a national strategic plan that focused on improving protection against vaccine-preventable diseases among adults.² The National Vaccine Plan was an opportunity for health insurance providers and policymakers to work together to ensure that Americans have access to essential vaccines, and to promote effective and optimal use. The roundtable published a subsequent report³ detailing recommendations to improve vaccine rates in the following areas:

1. Facilitating integrated, team-based vaccine care.
2. Leveraging health information technology to encourage patients to get vaccinated.
3. Raising awareness with people and their health care professionals.
4. Measuring and tracking progress in improving vaccine rates and reducing disparities among racial and ethnic groups.

In 2019, AHIP provided comments on HHS’ Request for Information for Developing the 2020 National Vaccine Plan.⁴ The goal of increasing access to vaccines was reflected in our comments, which proposed using metrics to identify opportunities for improving vaccination rates and tracking progress, implementing a significant public education campaign to promote vaccines and to combat misinformation - a challenge that has been especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic - and reducing disparities in vaccine access.

In the spring of 2021, AHIP participated in the Get the Medications Right (GTMRx) Institute Task Force, which comprised a group of national leaders focused on developing recommendations to address vaccine hesitancy and bolster vaccine confidence. AHIP was among the participants that advised on a new June report⁵ that offered recommendations for how stakeholders - including health insurance providers - can address community-level vaccine hesitancy, both in the short and long term. Short-term recommendations include engaging

² <https://www.hhs.gov/vaccines/national-vaccine-plan/index.html>

³ https://www.ahip.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Vaccine_Report_8.26.15-1.pdf

⁴ <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/09/24/2019-20415/request-for-information-rfi-from-non-federal-stakeholders-developing-the-2020-national-vaccine-plan>

⁵ <https://gtmr.org/report-june-2021-report-and-recommendations-to-the-gtmtx-national-task-force/>

community stakeholders, collaborating with local health networks, and creating local ‘vaccine confidence leagues’ that focus on person-to-person outreach.

The task force also noted that the government has an important role to play. The report recommends that Food and Drug Administration work to speed up final market approvals for vaccines, and that federal and states governments work together to improve the completeness and interoperability of immunization information systems to create a modern and real-time national vaccine information infrastructure.

Finally, the task force also noted the stark disparities in immunization rates, with African American, Hispanic, and Asian adults experiencing lower rates for all recommended vaccines. Given the potential benefit of using vaccines to prevent disease, targeted programs based on reliable data and evidence for what works most effectively to improve vaccine rates for the most vulnerable populations should be a priority – both through the duration of the pandemic and beyond.

Increasing COVID-19 Vaccination Rates by Accessing the State Immunization Information System

On March 3, 2021, in collaboration with the Administration, AHIP and the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association (BCBSA) announced a major initiative to promote vaccine equity and remove barriers to vaccinations – the Vaccine Community Connectors (VCC) program. At its inception, the VCC program was focused on vaccination of seniors aged 65+ in the most at-risk, socially vulnerable, and underserved communities as measured by the CDC’s Social Vulnerability Index⁶ by:

- Identifying individuals who are vulnerable to COVID-19 and live in areas where vaccination rates are most inequitable.
- Contacting them to help them get a COVID-19 vaccine, facilitating appointment scheduling, answering questions about vaccines, helping them understand when, where and how to get vaccinated and reminding them about any required second doses.
- Removing obstacles that may limit their ability to get vaccinated—for example, by providing transportation.

In partnership with the Association of Community Affiliated Plans (ACAP), the VCC has expanded to a broader population including individuals who rely on Medicaid as well as other vulnerable populations. With COVID-19 vaccine supplies now plentiful, the initiative has continued its efforts to help achieve the Administration’s goal of getting 70 percent of adults vaccinated.

Health insurance providers, however, face a major barrier to maximizing the effectiveness of their efforts to promote equitable access, uptake, and delivery of COVID-19 vaccines (and subsequent boosters)—lack of consistent and meaningful access to state and territorial immunization information systems (IIS).

⁶ [CDC/ATSDR’s Social Vulnerability Index \(SVI\)](#)

Sharing real-time state IIS data with all health insurance providers—whether they deliver coverage to Medicare, Medicaid or Commercial (i.e., employer-sponsored coverage or individual market) enrollees—is critical as health insurance providers seek to identify unvaccinated individuals, tailor outreach to engage them, identify trusted community partners to raise awareness, improve effectiveness in answering questions and building vaccine confidence, seek to connect people who want vaccination with providers who can administer them and facilitate needed appointments. Access to IIS data can also help health insurance providers identify individuals who may need a second dose, support the delivery of booster shots should they become necessary, and assist federal and state authorities in post-market safety surveillance pertaining to the vaccines.

In addition to more effectively promoting COVID-19 vaccines, access to IIS data would support health insurance providers' ability to improve existing programs such as HEDIS reporting, pediatric vaccine programs, and annual flu vaccines. Health insurance providers have a critical role in the public health system – access to IIS is crucial to future programs to identify and address disparities in vaccination rates across vulnerable and under-served communities.

Recommendations

Consistent with the GTMRx Institute recommendations, we recommend that:

1. Congress assure that CDC and other relevant federal and state agencies engage community stakeholders and local health networks to create local 'vaccine confidence leagues' that focus on person-to-person outreach.
2. The Food and Drug Administration be encouraged to speed up final market approvals for vaccines currently approved under emergency use authorization.
3. Federal and state governments be required to work together to improve the completeness and interoperability of immunization information systems to create a modern and real-time national vaccine information infrastructure.
4. Targeted vaccine uptake programs which are based on reliable data and evidence be prioritized and funded.

In addition, given the important role health insurance providers play in assuring individuals receive needed vaccinations and the critical importance of immunization information system access to effective vaccination efforts, Congress should assure that state and territorial immunization information systems receiving federal funding and assistance make queryable, interoperable access to the data in these systems available to health insurance providers. As health insurance providers are responsible for protecting enrollees' privacy under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), such access would also ensure continued privacy and security of personal health information to support Americans along their health journey.

Conclusion

As the association representing health insurance providers who cover hundreds of millions of Americans, we thank the Select Subcommittee for highlighting the importance that vaccines serve in overall health. AHIP and our members look forward to working with the Subcommittee on policies that improve immunization rates and Americans' health.