

Don Abram
Congressional Hearing Testimony
November 10th, 2021
Faith-based Community and COVID-19 Response
Re: Remarks

Thank you for the opportunity to share my own lived and professional experiences with this Committee, and for the opportunity to highlight the indispensable role that faith-based communities occupy in the local response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. My name is Don Abram and I am a Black queer minister from the Southside of Chicago. As a spiritual son of the Black Church and a native of the far southside roseland neighborhood, the role of faith is central to my own story.

I grew up in a hand-clapping, toe-tapping Black Church only minutes from my childhood home. Throughout my life, the church has served as a spiritual refugee in times of trouble and as a resource in the midst of material and financial need. In moments of both crisis and celebration, the Church has proved itself to be a trust-worthy, reliable, and present help to my family, my community, and I.

While the particularities of my story are unique, the powerful role of faith-based communities in the lives of everyday Americans is not. Across the City of Chicago and this country, mosques, churches, sygagues, and temples are more than houses of worship. They also act as community hubs, daycare centers, food banks, and even access points for affordable housing, critical social services, and quality health care. This is especially true for low-income communities of color.

The robust safety net created by faith-inspired organizations often cultivates pathways by which marginalized communities can access life-saving resources. The most salient and apropos example of this is shown in the faith-based communities response to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in marginalized communities wherein COVID-19 cases and related deaths are disproportionately high. In my role as a program manager at Interfaith Youth Core, I have been able to witness the on-the-ground impact of faith leaders first hand. Early on in the pandemic, as the need for vaccine education, literacy, and access ballooned, IFYC equipped Chicago-based faith leaders with the tools to launch vaccine education events and vaccine clinics in communities that needed it the most. Rabbis, preachers, imams, and spiritual teachers, from various faith traditions, came together to share best practices and to equip themselves to be vaccine ambassadors.

Partnering with medical experts, IFYC offered a 6 month training program that enabled faith-based communities to maximize their impact on the ground. Leveraging decades long relationships with their communities, faith leaders became instant trusted messengers, educating their parishioners on the efficacy of the vaccine and assuaging legitimate concerns with fact-based information. Coupling community events like block club parties and

sunday services, with vaccine clinics, faith-leaders were able to increase vaccination rates in their communities and, ultimately, helped to save lives.

As we consider effective strategies to increase vaccine uptake in the near and long term future, the role of faith-based leaders must be centered. Investing in a vibrant ecosystem of proximate faith leaders, in the city and across the country, will ensure that our response to the ongoing pandemic is culturally competent, contextually rooted, and grassroots focused. Over and over again in this pandemic, faith leaders have been proven to be effective bridge builders between local communities and health care providers, ensuring a more equitable distribution of vaccine education and vaccines themselves.

While we celebrate the progress made on vaccine adoption, particularly in marginalized communities, the need for education and the dismantling of access barriers to vaccines, remains a persistent challenge. As I see it, faith leaders are best poised to craft community-based solutions and outreach strategies that target those hardest to reach. Sensitive to the particular and niche needs of their community, faith leaders are equipped to meet people where they are, and to address on-the-ground barriers to vaccine adoption.

In my capacity as a Black queer minister and as a faith-based organizer, I am confident in saying that faith communities are critical to us defeating the spread of COVID-19 and to us healing from the loss of friends and loved ones. It is incumbent upon us that we resource, amplify, and coordinate with faith communities across lines of difference to further our progress on vaccine uptake.

I would like to thank the Committee for your time, and for the consideration of my testimony. God bless you and all of those on the front lines of the ongoing pandemic.