

Good afternoon. I would like to thank Representatives Foster and Krishnamoorthi for the opportunity to speak today about the importance of continuing vaccination efforts and addressing hesitancy in hard-to-reach and skeptical communities.

My name is Helene Gayle. I am the president and CEO of The Chicago Community Trust, Chicago's community foundation focused on the most pressing needs of the region. I come to this role with almost 40 years of public health and global and local economic development experience at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the international humanitarian organization CARE.

In 2020, I served as the co-chair of the National Academies of Science, Engineering & Medicine's Committee on Equitable Allocation of Vaccine for the Novel Coronavirus, which released a framework of recommendations for distributing the COVID vaccines equitably. In 2021, as vaccines began becoming available to the public, we at The Chicago Community Trust were proud to partner with national funders like the Rockefeller Foundation and local partners to develop the Chicagoland Vaccine Partnership, mobilizing community members to ensure equitable vaccine access and strengthen our public health workforce.

As a community foundation that has made closing the racial and ethnic wealth gap our highest priority, we know we cannot achieve our vision for the region if we do not equitably and intentionally ensure we can all recover from the health and economic impacts of COVID. The disproportionate impact of COVID on Black and Latinx communities has reaffirmed the need for our work and for equity-focused response and recovery plans. Today, the best way to control the pandemic and to set us all on a path to better health and an inclusive economic recovery is to get the vaccines to where they are most needed.

I am grateful that our public sector leaders at the city, county, and state levels have taken the necessary precautions to protect the health and

wellbeing of our most vulnerable residents and communities. I commend Mayor Lightfoot, Chicago Department of Public Health Commissioner Arwady, Cook County President Preckwinkle, Governor Pritzker, and Illinois Department of Public Health Director Ezike for putting health, safety, and equity first and setting us on a path to recovery. They have made tough choices around social distancing, mask wearing, vaccine distribution, and vaccine mandates in an effort to keep us all healthy and safe.

Although vaccines are widely available and effective, I am here today because many Chicagoans, particularly Black & Latinx residents, remain unvaccinated. While roughly 63% of white Chicago residents have completed their vaccination series, only 53% of Latinx and 44% of Black Chicagoans have done so.

Everyone deserves access to the COVID vaccine. That's why we partnered with other funders and public health leaders to launch the Chicagoland Vaccine Partnership, a collaboration of more than 170 organizations dedicated to building a healthier, more resilient Chicagoland. This coalition works to ensure equitable access to COVID vaccines, educate about vaccine safety, and mobilize community members to lead transformative public health efforts.

The partnership recently made over \$1M in grants to community-based organizations who can get the people they work with everyday vaccinated. These grants support organizations that have deep trust in their communities, but are not usually associated with public health, like food pantries, churches, youth boxing programs, and violence prevention organizations. And now with vaccines available for 5-11 year-olds, we've declared November a month of action to further educate families about vaccines and promote vaccination for all, creating fact sheets and informational videos, sharing vaccination appointment information, and even offering gift cards for families who get vaccinated at community health centers.

Despite these efforts, disparities in vaccination rates persist. To better understand why, we worked with the research group Mathematica to conduct a survey to talk to people in our community and hear what they had to say about the COVID vaccine. Although we only have preliminary results from the first wave of data collection, and the sample size is small, the insights are still revealing.

Most vaccinated respondents listed doctors, healthcare providers, scientists, and the CDC as the most trusted sources of information about the COVID vaccine. And most were motivated to get the vaccine to prevent death or severe illness and protect household or family members.

But for unvaccinated respondents, trust was a huge issue. While nearly everyone knew where they could go to get a vaccine or how to schedule an appointment, many unvaccinated respondents wanted more time to wait and see if the vaccine works, and many believed it was developed too quickly. They also worried about getting sick or experiencing side effects, and only about a quarter agreed that the vaccine was safe or effective. This group was not very trusting of vaccine information from sources like the CDC, scientists, religious leaders, news media, or government officials. Only 7% reported trusting federal government officials. Only 4% reported trusting state and local officials.

In communities of color, and for Black Americans in particular, we justifiably see more hesitancy due to generations of discriminatory medical practices that caused harm and distrust. Language and technology barriers to accessing vaccines also exist in Black and Brown communities. It is clear we need more than brochures, public service announcements, and financial incentives. But equally important, we need trusted messengers, one-to-one conversations, and persistence in educating and empowering hard-to-reach and skeptical populations. We need to ensure that issues like child-care and paid sick leave are addressed, so that people can get the vaccine and deal with any potential side effects. And we must develop messaging that describes how the

vaccine testing and production process was safely compressed into a shorter timeframe while still validating and supporting people who want more time. There is not a silver bullet to building trust and overcoming the obstacles that are faced in communities with lower vaccine rates. We have to meet them where they are and build solutions that meet their needs.

At The Chicago Community Trust, we have made closing the racial and ethnic wealth gap our highest priority. We cannot have a thriving economy at the household, community, or regional level if we don't do all we can within our reach to prevent further harm from the COVID-19 pandemic. Ensuring the equitable uptake of the COVID vaccine is a core prevention tool. It is both the prudent public health response and the responsible first step towards a just and inclusive economic recovery.

Thank you.