

Former HHS Officials Explore Vaccine Hesitancy in Black Community — COVID-19 burden for African Americans will only worsen if they refuse immunizations

by [Shannon Firth](#), Washington Correspondent, MedPage Today
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Past and present U.S. Surgeons General, speaking at the National Medical Association's virtual annual convention, said vaccine hesitancy in the Black community could worsen the disparate impact of COVID-19.

Current Surgeon General Jerome Adams, MD, MPH, who moderated the online discussion Saturday, said he believes that a COVID-19 vaccine will be ready by the end of this year or early next.

"But a safe and effective vaccine means nothing if people don't actually get vaccinated," Adams said.

Recent public opinion polls found that [just under 50% of those surveyed](#) said that they are either "unlikely" to get a COVID-19 vaccine or "uncertain" about taking one if it were available today, said Vivek Murthy, MD, who served as surgeon general under President Barack Obama.

Studies have shown that African Americans and Latinx people were more skeptical of the measles vaccine, according to [the Pew Research Center](#).

The Black community hasn't forgotten [the infamous Tuskegee study](#) and remains distrustful of the medical establishment, noted Louis Sullivan, MD, secretary of Health and Human Services under President George H.W. Bush and is founding dean of the Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta.

Partnering with Churches, Celebrities

Adams asked his predecessors -- also including David Satcher, MD, surgeon general in the Clinton administration -- what can be done to increase buy-in for a COVID-19 vaccine among African Americans.

Murthy encouraged partnerships with "messengers" inside the communities that health professionals are trying to reach.

"We've got to do that right now," said Murthy, even before a vaccine has been developed.

Satcher said that during his tenure, the government partnered with a national group of Black churches to promote immunizations in children before age 2 -- rates of which were then below 30% overall, and even lower in the Black community.

"People are not going to necessarily always trust us, but they might trust the church," he said. "So that's what we took advantage of, and it worked out quite well."

Sullivan agreed that "it's not always the doctor" who can effectively carry a public health message to the community. "It could be the minister or the community center director."

Adams suggested he was already on board with that message: he'd visited the 10 largest churches in the country last week.

The surgeons general also encouraged celebrity partnerships.

Murthy famously co-starred in a [vaccination public service announcement with Elmo from Sesame Street](#). He also partnered with basketball star Steph Curry to talk to children about nutrition.

Doctor Diversity

Sullivan said there needs to be more diversity in the healthcare workforce -- by gender, race and ethnicity -- to improve communication and trust among people of color.

"More trust leads to more understanding and results in better adherence to health recommendations, such as utilization of vaccines, of prescription medicines and other health behaviors," he said.

One barrier is the cost of tuition, which can leave students roughly \$250,000 in debt. Sullivan argued for increasing the number of scholarships in medicine to help achieve more diversity.

Another critical strategy for improving vaccine uptake is transparency, Murthy said, a particular problem during the pandemic. He suggested that experts such as the surgeon general and FDA staff meet with Congress to interpret the data as they emerge.

A related challenge is the lack of health literacy in the U.S. which Murthy attributes at least partially to the U.S. education system, which doesn't teach students how to make sense of scientific data.

Schools need to begin teaching students how to look carefully at scientific data and to understand, for instance, the difference between a press release and a peer-reviewed study.

Poor health literacy is only compounded by the spread of misinformation online and online organizations must take some responsibility here, Murthy said.


A social media company can no longer hide behind the argument that it is "just a platform where people share information," and shrug off the spread of misinformation.

Whether it's Facebook, Google, Twitter or another group,"if you've got the ability to disseminate information, it falls upon you to do everything you can to make sure that information is accurate, especially when lives are at stake, when it comes to a vaccine,"

Murthy said.

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