



Case Study: Louisiana Balance of State Vaccine Engagement

The Louisiana Balance of State, operated by the Louisiana Housing Corporation (LHC), noticed that the COVID-19 vaccination rate across the state was very low, especially among people experiencing homelessness. To expand COVID-19 vaccination opportunities for people experiencing homelessness statewide, the Balance of State identified a gap in vaccine engagement opportunities in rural and suburban areas. As a response, they used their Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (ESG-CV) grant to fund the START Corporation, a federally qualified health center (FQHC), to develop a statewide vaccination strategy, implement a vaccination ambassador program, and run several health fair events throughout the fall of 2021. These events, which succeeded in vaccinating 1,200 individuals, centered on a vaccine-first approach as well as education and outreach.

Vaccine First!

When the state vaccination program began, most people experiencing homelessness reported that they had already been offered the vaccine. Access to the vaccine was not the problem; they needed a new strategy to increase uptake. After assessing the current approaches to engagement, the START Corporation found that strategies would benefit from being more proactive. Initially, staff were either taking a passive approach in offering vaccines (e.g., “Are you interested?”) or directly instructing clients to visit a clinic office on a certain day and time without following up. These strategies can be effective for people already interested in being vaccinated who can prioritize vaccination over other needs. However, many people experiencing homelessness must prioritize basic needs of daily living and survival, such as where to access bathroom facilities, meals, laundry, and a place to sleep. Different approaches were needed to expand vaccine accessibility and increase uptake.

The START Corporation developed strategies modeled after the homeless system’s housing-first strategies to increase COVID-19 vaccinations. Adaptations of this housing model for vaccination included:

Repeated offerings—Creating trusted relationships, truly listening to concerns and answering questions, and repeatedly offering the vaccine over time helped people become more confident in choosing to be vaccinated.

On-site vaccinations—Bringing the vaccine to people experiencing homelessness, who did not have time to travel to additional sites to get vaccinated, was a key factor for success. Sites and locations where the team set up events or engaged people in the statewide strategy included meal programs, shelters, day centers, bus stations, libraries, parks, and large box store parking lots.

Flexibility and creative thinking—Similar to housing-first strategies, a vaccine-first approach is creative. It was the job of the vaccine ambassadors to figure out what a person wanted or needed: some people wanted a vaccination while others were looking for information. In either case, the vaccine team worked to deliver on the request. This also established trust, so people were more likely to ask for their needs to be met in the future.

Incentives—Vaccine incentives, especially gift cards with a larger dollar amount, increased the likelihood of an individual participating in a conversation about the vaccine and seriously considering vaccination. Incentives can be challenging to manage and message but were another effective way to encourage people to consider their choice to get vaccinated. The state provided \$50 incentives each time a person received their first, second, and booster shot of the COVID-19 vaccine.

“People in shelters are usually getting the care they need. The target audience is those people who we have to get out to reach.”

— Tai, Vaccine Ambassador

Dennis is a 55-year-old man who recently changed jobs and now works doing construction, often in private homes. He wants to be safe while he's working. The construction company also strongly encourages the vaccine because some customers ask if the people who are working in their homes are vaccinated. He said there had been vaccination events set up "all over" but that he hadn't been sure he wanted a vaccine until the event at the drop-in center he frequents. He had been worried the vaccine was developed too quickly. Dennis decided to get a vaccine because he had seen enough other people whom he knows and trusts get vaccinated.

Main Event Components and Considerations

The chart below illustrates the main components of the events and the considerations for project planning and implementation.

Component	Considerations
Staff configuration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vaccine Administrator, Vaccine Ambassadors, Data Entry Person
Onboarding and training topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship-building, understanding distinct team roles, self- and colleague-care Motivational interviewing, an evidence-based practice for supporting people through decision-making, engaging all types of people General technical knowledge of vaccine types and side effects
Supplies and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vaccines and other medical supplies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer Tdap or flu shots in addition to COVID-19 vaccinations 3 Epinephrine auto-injector .3mg Liquid epinephrine 1:1000 (1mg/ml) Oral Benadryl Nitrile gloves Hand sanitizer Bandages Stethoscope Alcohol wipes 1cc syringe with 25g x 1-in. needle 3cc syringe with 25g x 1-in. needle Timers for the 15-minute observation period Tables and chairs—two 8-ft. folding tables and 8–10 chairs If in a place-based setting, offer vaccines to staff as well as guests Computer(s) for data entry, mobile hot spot Documentation tracking form for gift cards Lawn signs to post around the vaccine location
Participant-facing supplies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engagement tools: snacks, water, or juice Information sheets
Operational support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Per diem for staff when traveling outside of their community to deliver vaccination Mileage allowance for staff when driving their own vehicles Rental van for encampments or when staff do not have their own vehicles for transportation A designated backup or support person

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasis on self-care: Bluetooth speaker for music, lotion for when hands get dry from too much sanitizer, a space heater or fan for climate control, easy-to-eat snacks
Incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incentives, especially gift cards for larger dollar amounts (\$50), were highly effective in encouraging people to get vaccinated or to take second doses or boosters
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ESG-CV

Andrena is a 53-year-old woman who is chronically homeless and engages in sex work. She sleeps outside by preference. Andrena frequents only one agency in Baton Rouge, one that offers lunch and dinner. She said she had been considering getting vaccinated but was nervous about it. Andrena also said she couldn't wait for others in the line to go first, so staff moved her to the front of the line. Other people waiting recognized Andrena's vulnerability and agreed she could see the medical team first. Andrena was glad to get the incentive gift card and was vaccinated during the one-stop engagement.

Team Configuration, Training, and Self-Care

The START Corporation placed great emphasis on hiring people with a positive, friendly approach and technical skills for this work. The START Corporation team regularly worked to engage people on a human-to-human level in whatever way was necessary. They helped people adjust multiple layers of clothing to expose their arms to receive a vaccine, they held people's hands during the vaccinations, they talked openly about their own vaccination experiences, and they actively engaged people in conversation while administrative activities were being completed.

The team received training in motivational interviewing geared toward vaccine engagements. Utilizing a motivational interviewing approach helped staff, especially the Vaccine Ambassadors, understand different methods for engaging in deep conversations that could help an individual make an informed decision about whether to be vaccinated. The motivational interviewing session can be found [here](#).

More intentional engagements meant long events since many people were not yet ready to receive a vaccine. The staff was well supported and had access to comfort items like snacks, water, an accessible restroom, and meals.

Below are the essential staff who comprised their teams:

Vaccine Administrator—A qualified healthcare professional who created a comfortable, non-judgmental environment for patients, and answered questions about the vaccines including side effects, pros and cons of certain brands of vaccine, and when and how to access a second shot or a booster. The most effective administrators brought a positive and engaging attitude to this work, proactively engaged people experiencing homelessness, and emphasized the benefits of becoming vaccinated. The Vaccine Administrator on the START Corporation team was a medically trained nurse who administered the COVID-19 shots.

Vaccine Ambassadors—Participant engagement specialists were key to successful vaccine events. Trained in motivational interviewing skills, these staff members engaged people who were considering a vaccine, talked through the pros and cons, and brought interested people into the events to introduce them to the administrators. People with lived experience had a unique ability to connect with people in shelters and housing programs.

"You have to make sure your team is flexible, unselfish, gets along, and their communication and ideas [brainstorming] has more than ONE way of working that benefits them all."

— Greg, Vaccine Ambassador

Data Specialists—Data Specialists researched the statewide vaccine database (LinkSys) for names of people who were uncertain about previous vaccine dates to ensure they were eligible to get a second dose or a booster. This was an essential activity since many people did not recall if they had been vaccinated, when they had been vaccinated, which vaccine they had received, or if they were eligible for a booster shot.

Program Staff—At each site, program staff organized and triaged people queued for a vaccine or other services. Onsite staff knew many of the

participants who arrived and engaged them in more familiar ways, which helped the participants to feel more comfortable about an unfamiliar, event-based vaccination team. “Working the queue” was an important staff function. A key aspect of their job was identifying people who might not wait in long lines and moving those individuals to the front of the line to ensure they were seen by the vaccine team. This prioritization was done transparently so that people in the line understood why certain people received their vaccinations first.

Vaccine Champions—At every event, informal champions within the homeless population either emerged or were identified by Vaccine Ambassadors. Vaccine Champions were a critical component of successful vaccination events. Champions chatted with their peers about COVID-19 and the benefits of vaccination while they were waiting for the nurse or for other services. Some Vaccine Champions were initially there to receive second shots or boosters and had personal experiences to share. They were talkative and easily engaged with others. Once identified by staff, Vaccine Champions continued sharing their experiences and opinions with others and supported them until their vaccinations were administered.

Vaccine Champion

Jerry is a 72-year-old Vietnam veteran. He came to the event to get a booster shot after receiving two doses of Moderna earlier in the year. Jerry was very encouraging to others in the line and said they shouldn't be worried and that he was proof. He was happy to be getting a booster and knew it would protect him and his family.

Vaccine Engagement Strategies

The chart below is a summary of vaccine engagement approaches used by the START Corporation.

Event Type	Offering	Engagement Opportunities
Full health care event model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> COVID-19 testing, tetanus vaccination, telehealth appointment services, and COVID-19 vaccinations Vaccine incentives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple healthcare offerings provided different opportunities to discuss the benefits of the COVID-19 vaccine Meals, snacks, and candy were provided to everyone at the location regardless of their interest in vaccination
Community service location event model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vaccine provided at a trusted community resource location where unsheltered people come to have basic needs met, such as meals and basic supplies Staff also received boosters during the event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meals, snacks, and candy were provided to everyone at the location regardless of whether or not they were there for a COVID-19 vaccine Music was playing to set an upbeat tone to the event Light and friendly one-on-one or small group conversations Flyers posted around the neighborhood and locations people frequent
Feeding program model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All-day events located at meal programs Organized system to monitor personal belongings while they went into the site to get vaccinated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mealtime conversations with small groups During non-meal times, the team's Vaccine Ambassador combed the area for people, posted signs about which vaccines were available, and spread the word about a \$50 gift card incentive Music was playing to set an upbeat tone to the event

<p>Mobile vaccine model</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobile events seek people who do not have access to programs • Drive around to find clusters of people experiencing homelessness, in either established or unestablished encampments • Advanced coordination with locations to obtain approval to conduct mobile events • Offered snacks and water and other basic medical supplies • Mobile vaccine packs and a Vaccine Administrator available for in-the-moment vaccination opportunities • Help individuals access mainstream shelters or other services • Number of people vaccinated will be lower than larger events • Staff incorporated safety measures such as going out in pairs, letting people know the locations they are visiting, knowing their surroundings, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approached people in libraries, transportation hubs, stores, parks, and on the streets • Team introduced themselves and the vaccine project and asked to initiate conversations • Provided referrals to connect people for additional healthcare needs • Accommodated everyone interested in being vaccinated, regardless of homeless eligibility status • Provided appropriate referrals for services, as needed
------------------------------------	---	---