



BRIEF

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Camden Coalition's vaccine confidence training helps providers build confidence in themselves

Introduction

Despite highly transmissible variants and compelling evidence that COVID-19 vaccines significantly reduce the risks of hospitalization and death, healthcare providers are still struggling to encourage vaccine-hesitant Americans to seek protection from the virus. Many providers and other team members remain unsure of how to even broach the subject with the individuals they are caring for. So, the Camden Coalition created a new virtual training course based on the perspectives of both community members and the providers and care teams who serve them to give frontline staff the tools to address vaccine hesitancy in patients through techniques like motivational interviewing and presumptive language.

In the fall of 2020, anticipating that a coronavirus vaccine might soon become available, staff at the Coalition leveraged our community partnerships to learn what questions, concerns, and fears Camden residents had about a COVID-19 vaccine. We knew how challenging equitable roll-out of testing had been, as it required a robust collaboration among local partners and the meaningful inclusion of community voices. So, we sought to get ahead of the vaccine roll-out by engaging the community early on to understand what misconceptions about vaccines were prevalent, what kinds of information people wanted, and from whom.

Our staff partnered with local nonprofits and social service agencies to conduct 265 interviews, eliciting a wide range of perspectives from Camden and other South Jersey residents. We included people who aren't often consulted: those living on the streets, living with HIV, and those who use drugs. We also interviewed people with complex health conditions, older adults, and families with young children.

One finding from the survey of residents stood out: when asked what might build people's confidence in a vaccine, 72%

of folks who were concerned about the vaccine stated that more education had or would make them feel more confident; and 62% of folks who expressed concerns stated that a conversation with a medical professional had or would make them feel more confident.

This finding, paired with our on-the-ground observations that provider teams were struggling to keep up with the need to address vaccine hesitancy in the community, led us to assess the readiness of healthcare providers to answer patients' vaccine questions. We surveyed 150 staff at primary care providers' offices, purposefully including nurses, medical assistants, community health workers, and administrative staff as well as physicians. We knew that patients often confide in other members of the care team — such as the friendly person at the front desk, the scheduler on the phone, or the medical assistant who takes their vitals — as much as their doctor. Yet these members of the team may never receive training on the person-centered engagement techniques that could contribute to better patient outcomes.



The survey results showed two-thirds of the respondents from primary care practices were likely to engage patients who express hesitancy in conversations about a COVID-19 vaccine, yet three-quarters of those surveyed said they'd never been trained how to do so. To help fill that need, senior team members at the Camden Coalition, in conjunction with community leaders, developed a virtual training program for individuals who work in clinical settings to engage patients who express vaccine hesitancy. Since April, close to 400 people have taken our two-hour, online [Vaccine Confidence Training](#).

During the training session, Camden staff share insights from the surveys and help attendees understand the science behind the vaccines and how they were developed. The bulk of the training is interactive: participants practice various strategies to open up two-way conversations and help people feel heard. Some tactics are simple such as forgoing participatory language (i.e. “Are you getting a COVID-19 vaccine?”) and instead using presumptive language (i.e. “When is your vaccine appointment?”) – an approach that has been shown to be more effective in promoting vaccination. In addition, participants build skills for motivational interviewing, an evidence-based technique in which staff ask patients open-ended questions to elicit their intrinsic motivations and then reflect on what they've heard.

Opening up conversations

From October to early December 2021, we spoke with several people who took the Vaccine Confidence Training course. The interviews were conducted as the Delta variant was raging but before Omicron became prevalent.

Each of the participants said that they've used motivational interviewing to elicit patients' concerns. In doing so, they've learned that many worry the vaccines' approval was too rushed, or that the vaccines would affect their fertility. For some, COVID vaccination is a purely political issue, while for others stories like very rare instances of myocarditis in patients who received mRNA vaccines, and blood-clotting issues associated with the Johnson & Johnson vaccine were salient. “Once one person hears one bad story like this, it doesn't even matter that it's one out of hundreds of thousands,” says course attendee Heather Lawson, an N.P at Inspira Health. “That's what sticks with them.”

Meeting patients where they are

Attendees reported that most patients who wanted to get the vaccine had already done so; many of the remainder are either hesitant or firmly opposed. But all the participants said the training helped them feel more confident in engaging patients, and even their own family members, who were skeptical of the vaccine.

Karen Ruggles, R.N., a population health and inpatient coordinator at Cooper University Health Care, has had an easier time since none of her patients, mostly older adults, have been adamantly opposed. In broaching the topic of COVID-19 vaccinations, she starts by asking questions that help her understand patients' views. "I ask if they [have ever] been exposed, whether they are wearing their mask, [and if] they know anybody that's had COVID," she says. "[I'm] exploring where they're at."

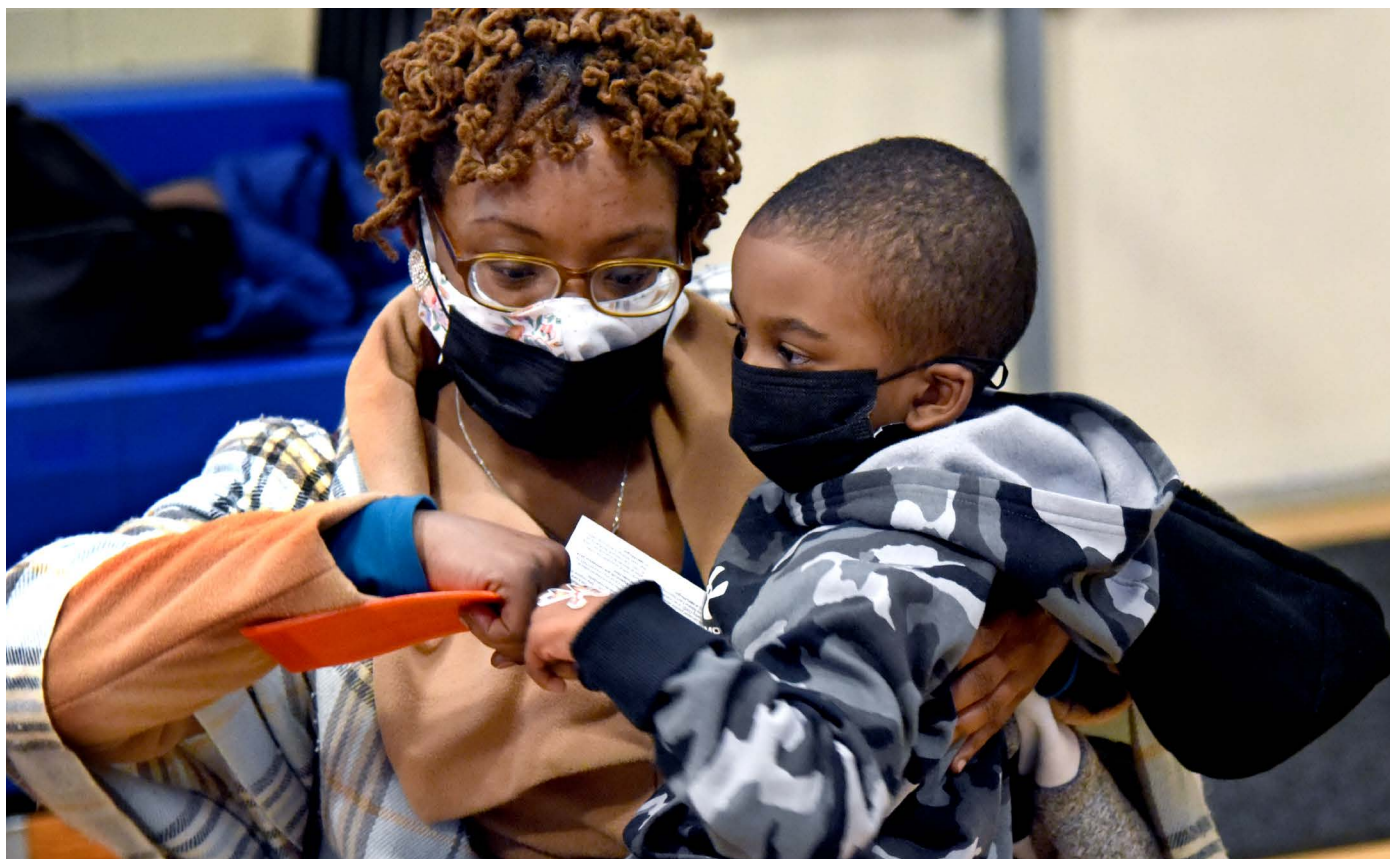
Using empathy and personal experiences

The training program encourages healthcare providers and their teams to share their own stories through therapeutic use-of-self to help patients make their own decisions by hearing how others have done so. Sharing personal information may buck up against traditional medical education, which often encourages people to maintain professional reserve, but it's a technique that works, as long as healthcare professionals put up guardrails about how and what they share. Katherine Nguyen, R.N., who divides her

time between the ICU at Virtua Memorial Hospital and the Cherry Hill Free Clinic, relies on her personal experience as the daughter of Vietnamese immigrants to empathize with patients who worry the government is implanting microchips to surveil the public via the vaccines, a common strain of misinformation. "I understand why some of my own family members [have this concern,]" Nguyen says. "They come from a country whose government has a history of tracking movements and monitoring people."

Keeping the door open

As the pandemic keeps changing, so are people's views. Lori Yoka, a community health worker at Volunteers in Medicine Free Clinics of South Jersey, noted that when more people began testing positive due to Omicron, those who may have been hesitant before started to change their minds about receiving the vaccine. In the meantime, healthcare professionals continue to get creative, opportunistically speaking at community events and engaging friends, neighbors, and patients. "Even when a person says no, I always try to leave the door open so that they come back to us if they change their mind," Nguyen says.



About the Camden Coalition

We are a multidisciplinary nonprofit working to improve care for people with complex health and social needs in Camden, NJ, and across the country. The Camden Coalition works to advance the field of complex care by implementing person-centered programs and piloting new models that address chronic illness and social barriers to health and wellbeing. Supported by a robust data infrastructure, cross-sector convening, and shared learning, our community-based programs deliver better care to the most vulnerable individuals in Camden and regionally.

Through our National Center for Complex Health and Social Needs (National Center), the Camden Coalition works to build the field of complex care by inspiring people to join the complex care community, connecting complex care practitioners with each other, and supporting the field with tools and resources that move the field of complex care forward. The National Center's founding sponsors are the Atlantic Philanthropies, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and AARP.



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