

## **Looming Challenges of COVID-19 Immunization: Communications and Messaging**

*NEHI held the first in a series of virtual summit meetings on COVID-19 immunization on Thursday, August 27. The following is a summary of panelists' insights on how government and health care leaders should communicate trustworthy information on COVID-19 vaccines and promote safe vaccination to the public.*

**Restore the CDC:** The CDC has played an essential role in the country's immunization ecosystem for decades. Clinicians and public health professionals look to the CDC as the trusted authority on immunization guidelines. State governments rely on the CDC as their primary source of federal support for immunization programs and infrastructure. Prior to COVID-19, federal pandemic planning put the CDC at the center of national preparedness for emergency immunization. The CDC's ability to serve as a trusted leader in pandemic preparedness and response has been undermined by events that have shaken confidence in its ability to steer clear of political influence and adhere to scientific principles.

Restoring confidence in the CDC's ability to fulfill its role is critical to ending the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for future pandemic emergencies.

**Tackle Confusion, Distrust and Misinformation Head On:** The COVID-19 crisis is a public health emergency that has engendered unprecedented controversy. Transparent and credible information about COVID-19 vaccines is more important than ever. Black communities, which have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19, are indicating greater reluctance than the population at large to receiving the vaccine. This hesitancy is layered on mistrust of the health care system stemming from historic health care inequities, placing a greater need for trusted information channels outside of health providers. As an added complexity, COVID-19 vaccines that come to market may include those developed and manufactured using novel approaches, necessitating efforts to heighten public understanding of the science behind these vaccines and the evidence supporting their use.

With a goal of achieving herd immunity, clinical and public health leaders will need to work with local leaders to acknowledge and understand the unique concerns of individual communities to craft meaningful communications. This work requires considerable planning and new resources. State public health agencies cannot bear this burden without federal support and partnerships with the private sector. Both must be made available now.

**Leaders outside the Federal Government Must Fill the Leadership Gap:** The effort to restore public trust in the CDC should begin now, but, given the immediate need for credible communications, other efforts must be undertaken in parallel to build confidence in the information provided about vaccines. Non-government actors from multiple sectors, (e.g., scientific organizations, professional societies, universities, consumer groups) have acted in concert before and can fill the leadership gap to maintain public trust in the safety and effectiveness of vaccines, including COVID-19 and yearly influenza vaccines. By intentionally coordinating their work to explain essential concepts and address misinformation and disinformation, they will be able to arm local entities with clear and accurate guidance.

Non-government leaders should continue to demand transparency in the government's decision-making on COVID-19 vaccine safety and effectiveness. Release of a COVID-19 vaccine under an Emergency Use

Authorization from the FDA will sow further public distrust of vaccine safety and make patient uptake of vaccines less likely. COVID-19 vaccines should be approved by the FDA only when enough data from Phase III clinical trials are available for rigorous review. Non-government leaders should be prepared to back up their call for transparency and rigorous review with an active partnership with state and local organizations to support more tailored messaging campaigns, consistent with the facts.