
Press and Publicity Report

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Mistrust And Lack Of Opportunity Are Stalling Pueblo's COVID Vaccination Rate. Here's How Leaders Want To Fix That



By [Elena Rivera](#)
June 1, 2021

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Health organizations across Pueblo County are working to build trust to improve the vaccination rate.

Randi Addington works with Health Colorado, Inc., which assists people across 19 counties in Southeastern Colorado access health services, including COVID-19 vaccine appointments.

According to the Pueblo Department of Public Health and Environment, [49.3 percent of Pueblo's population have at least one dose of a vaccine](#), which is below the state's target of 70 percent.

Addington said slowing vaccine rates in Pueblo County are less about accessibility or hesitancy, and more about life situations that can make getting the vaccine challenging, including taking time off and transportation. [In Colorado, employers are required to give time off for vaccinations](#).

To work around some of these challenges, she's collaborated with community partners to set up clinics where people are.

"What we really saw people doing was going to the vaccine when it was accessible attend the concert, when it was within walking distance, and particularly when it was being offered by somebody that they knew and trusted," Addington said. "That's what we were seeing in terms of making it, for lack of a better word, accessible, but really convenient for people."

"We need to listen to people and hear what their fears are"

Addington said she teamed up with the Center for Health Progress and Southern Colorado Harm Reduction Association (SoCoHRA) to host these sites across the county. SoCoHRA became an approved COVID-19 vaccine distribution site in February, and has held walkup clinics at a local nonprofit office for the past few months, vaccinating hundreds of people at a time.

Judy Solano with SoCoHRA said when the state put out the call for vaccine equity sites, she was ready.

"I just had a need to get involved and bring the vaccines to a lot of our underserved populations that don't have access," Solano said.

For Addington and Solano, these community clinics give providers the opportunity to answer people's concerns. Addington said people in healthcare are embracing a "health and neighborhood model" not just for COVID-19, but for health concerns moving forward.

"It's not just always about the science, it's not always going to be about the public health opinion, but also those trusts in the community," Addington said.

"We've been running at 100 miles an hour trying to get everyone vaccinated," Solano said. "We need to listen to people and hear what their fears are. Pueblo is a very hands-on community, we know each other, and in a lot of ways it's a small town but yet we're a bigger city. So, we still have a need for partnerships and for the community leaders that are able to connect to bigger populations, and be able to say we're here to answer your questions."

While it's challenging to pin down the exact reasons the federal mass vaccination site in Pueblo, [which closes June 14](#), hasn't been seeing as much traffic as expected, Addington said the site brought up concerns for a lot of her clients.

"We heard a lot from people about the fear of discrimination," Addington said. "If there was police presence, if there was armed military, there would be a lot of resistance to go into that site." Addington said many Latinx clients were concerned that since the site was run by FEMA, which is under the Department of Homeland Security, they weren't sure if they or a family member could be turned over to ICE if they were undocumented.

"I think that's one thing that we see with a lot of our community-based sites is a lack of police in uniform," Addington said. "We really try to keep it friendly, community-based, community center-based. And we've seen the difference in the way that people perceive those sites." Now Addington said she's working to bring this community model to other counties in the Southeast, like Chaffee County and the San Luis Valley.

"That's why those of us that are doing this work, we just can't let off the gas right now," Solano said. "Even if no one's listening, we still need to continue on."

Solano is also partnering with the Pueblo City County Library District to [hold vaccine clinics at all five locations](#) throughout June and in early July. All clinics will be open from 1-6 p.m. People can register an appointment beforehand [online](#), or simply walk up.

NEWS

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Heather Willard | The Pueblo Chieftain

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Library hosts kid-based kickoff for summer

The Pueblo City-County Library District will host a Summer Kickoff event from 7:30-9:30 p.m. on June 5 for Pueblo youth at the Robert Hoag Rawlings Public Library, 100 E. Abriendo Ave.

The event will feature an outdoor concert by the Might of Henry, a drive-in showing of SCOOB! and food will be available from a selection of food trucks that have announced participation. In addition, the first 100 kids at the event will receive a travel activity kit at no cost. Parking is limited to 60 vehicles.

There is no cost to attend the event.

Ride horses and play poker to raise funds

The Bits of Freedom group will host its second annual trail ride poker fundraiser in the pasture beginning at 10 a.m. on June 5.

The event requires a \$30 entry fee, garnering five cards for each participant. Registration closes 30 minutes before the event, which is not a race, but a poker tournament.

Proceeds from the event go to Bits of Freedom, which offers certified riding instructions to children and adults with special needs.

The event will be held at Roekin B Bar Ranch on West Red Creek Springs Road. More information can be received by calling Shelly Even, 369-9756.

Rock with brews at Brues Alehouse

Brues Alehouse will host musician Joey Harkum and Nathan Maxwell, of Flogging Molly, with doors opening at 7:30 p.m. June 5.

Maxwell is joining Harkum for a stop on Harkum's tour to help promote the musician's new album, Storyboard. Tickets can be found on [joeyharkum.com](#) or at Brues' website, with costs ranging from \$4 and up.

By [Shelby Filangi](#)June 10, 2021 6:13 PM Live
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More than 6,500 kids register for the Pueblo Reading Pays challenge for a chance to earn \$100

PUEBLO, Colo. (KRDO) -- Within just one week, more than 6,500 kids have registered for the Reading Pays: Pueblo's \$1 Million Reading Challenge.

The program, put on by the City of Pueblo and Pueblo County and Pueblo City-County Library District, offers kids a chance to earn \$100 by checking out 10 times from Pueblo libraries.

The Library District says they've seen an average of 850 sign ups per-day since the program first opened on June 1.

The district as a whole has seen an increase in book checkouts, especially in the picture book section. One library even ran out of children's books because of the high demand.

The program is open to all Pueblo County kids 17-and-under and runs through August 31. Participants must re-register for each month of the program's duration. Only one registration, and only one completion form per participant will be accepted each month of the program.

To learn more, and register for the challenge, [click here](#)

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**Shelby Filangi**

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Vaccine hesitancy might prevent herd immunity - Pueblo residents could find themselves without protection

June 10, 2021 Pueblo Chieftain, The (CO)
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Papa Mario's Gilled Cheese Truck sat outside the Robert Hoag Rawlings Public Library branch on a recent Friday afternoon, its cheesy aroma wafting through the afternoon heat.

Just inside the library was a vaccination clinic that promised a deal: get the shot and grab a free lunch from Papa Mario's.

It was the last library COVID-19 vaccination clinic that week, ending an incentive push from the Southern Colorado Harm Reduction Association that gave out vouchers to various Pueblo food trucks to those who came in to get a first dose of the Pfizer shot.

"There has to be some type of incentive for folks at this point," said SCHRA Director Judy Solano. "In the beginning, these clinics had 300 to 400 people. It was easy — people were motivated and those that wanted to get a vaccine were just waiting for that moment."

"About mid-April on, everything just dropped off."

In the end, 39 people got vaccinated at those five library clinics that offered free lunch.

As the United States crosses the mark of 600,000 COVID-related deaths, public health officials and community leaders are doing all they can to encourage vaccination. Experts said that herd immunity — the point where enough people are protected from the virus so it is not likely to spread rampantly — will be achieved when about 70% of the population is fully vaccinated.

That's President Joe Biden's goal for the Fourth of July, an opportunity to celebrate both America's freedom and — in a parallel — freedom from the pandemic that upended nearly every aspect of American life.

Persistent vaccine hesitancy, however, is putting that goal out of reach.

As of June 15, 43.9% of the country was fully vaccinated and 52.6% had received at least one dose, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In Pueblo County, 51.6% of people have at least one dose of the vaccine as of June 15, according to the Pueblo Department of Public Health and Environment

"Everybody has their own story about why they haven't gotten the vaccine," said PDPHE Director Randy Evertts.

Evertts said that the department has realistic expectations about vaccine adoption in the county. He said that based on historical data, 10-15% of the county will never get vaccinated and 50% are early, enthusiastic adopters.

That means it's all about reaching that middle 35-40% who could theoretically be swayed either way.

"Our job is to figure out how to reach them and try to increase the vaccine uptake through education ... and just try to share with them good information and good data so that they can make an informed choice," Evertts said.

'I feel like we're being led like sheep'

Talk to someone who is vaccine hesitant, and it's likely they will explain that they want to wait and see how the vaccine affects people in the long term.

"It's not the point of convincing me. I would love to get the vaccine and be partaking in the community. But I feel like we're being led like sheep," said Brenna Carder, 28. "I'm not saying they're microchipping us or all that craziness."

"I just want to see trial and error."

Carder and her 10-year-old daughter are plant-based, and she said she is overly conscious about everything she puts into her body.

"A lot of people have adverse reactions to every option that's available right now," she said. "I'm just waiting to see something more reliable."

For Kayla Kerwin, 23, her hesitancy comes from being nine months pregnant. She was diagnosed with gestational hypertension and feels that any medication during her pregnancy is a "gamble."

"I have heard it can cause complications," she wrote over Facebook about the vaccine, citing a fear of blood clots or a miscarriage. "I also have blood pressure issues with this pregnancy so I believe it would be ideal to wait."

The CDC recently found that pregnant women are getting vaccinated at lower rates than the general population, especially pregnant Black and Hispanic women. While pregnant women were not included in clinical vaccine trials, there is a growing amount of data that suggest the vaccine is safe and effective for them.

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommend vaccine access for pregnant women, but emphasize autonomy in choice.

The most common symptoms from the COVID-19 vaccine are fatigue, nausea, arm pain and headaches. Some people develop flu-like symptoms, which experts say is a sign that the body is building protection against the virus.

There have been extremely rare instances of more severe side effects, such as the six cases of blood clotting after the Johnson & Johnson single-dose vaccine. That vaccine was paused for review but resumed its administration nationwide after medical and scientific teams at the CDC and Food and Drug Administration reviewed the safety of the shot.

Shane Likes, 36, was initially worried about getting the vaccine because of the reported symptoms he saw on social media, especially after the second dose. He decided to get it anyway. As a restaurant server, he said he felt responsible for keeping himself and his customers safe.

"I was really hesitant with the side effects they were talking about, like getting sick," he said. "I work paycheck-to-paycheck. You miss one night of work, you're not just missing 10 hours of work, you're losing \$200 in tips. I was worried about getting sick and getting taken out for a week."

Employers are required to give time off for vaccinations in Colorado.

Likes didn't end up experiencing any side effects besides a sore arm for a day.

Vaccine hesitancy among the Hispanic and Latino population

Evetts said he has noticed increased vaccine hesitancy among Pueblo's Hispanic population. That's apparent in numbers from the FEMA vaccination clinic at the Colorado State Fairgrounds, which closed on June 14.

He said that 48% of the doses given out at the site were to white people and 31% were to Hispanic people. That doesn't line up with county demographics; Pueblo County is 43% Hispanic or Latino, according to census data.

"There could be historic or cultural reasons for that," Evetts said.

Both Evetts and Solano, the SCHRA director, said it's important to consider the historical context of how certain racial demographics have been treated when it comes to health care.

The FEMA site, for example, was staffed by National Guard soldiers.

"We don't realize what a huge barrier and somewhat of a trauma that can be for people of color, undocumented, migrant people," Solano said. "Even if they're not doing anything wrong, they're not going to cross that line. We have to be sensitive to those things and offer alternatives."

Her mission for the past four months has been to offer those alternatives, hence the library partnership. SCHRA seeks to hold vaccine clinics in a community setting, where people are comfortable asking questions and trust the answer. It's also an effort to meet people where they already are, taking out the necessity of planning a time to go to a mass vaccination site that might not be in their neighborhood.

"It's the people that are under-educated, have mobility issues, or just don't even know where that access point is," said Nick Potter, Pueblo City-County Library's director of community relations.

Whereas there are people who are vaccine hesitant because they are unsure of the science, there are also those who simply may not be vaccinated yet because of lack of transportation, abnormal work hours or where they live in Pueblo.

"The barriers to getting a vaccine are much greater — particularly for communities of color — are much greater than the personal hesitancy. That hesitancy comes out of the multitudes of barriers that exist," said Theresa Trujillo, the director of community organizing for the Center for Health Progress.

Trujillo has overseen a group of volunteers since February that work on registering people to get vaccinating and then providing transportation, translation and whatever other support their registrants need when they actually go to the clinic. Those so-called caracols, or health promoters from the community who are trained in equity, reach unvaccinated people at Mexican supermarkets, in line for the community pool and in the fields where seasonal migrant workers are laboring.

"We engage folks where they already congregate," Trujillo said.

It falls in line with an idea of meeting people where they are. Holding clinics in libraries, for example, is a chance to invite those populations into a "space that is open and free and accessible to everybody," Potter said.

He said that he saw people come to those clinics because a library branch was closer than any other free vaccine clinic.

That included one couple who rode their motorized wheelchairs to the Lucero branch.

"They told us that if it wasn't for that location, they would not have had access," Solano said. "They don't drive, they're in the Eastside, and there's already transportation issues in that part of town. That was a huge victory. Even if we don't have the numbers, it's those instances that make it completely worth it."

Young people in Pueblo prove difficult to reach

Pueblo leaders are continuing to mount concentrated efforts to reach vaccine hesitant populations, including specifically targeting young people.

Just 22.2% of people in Pueblo County between the ages of 21 and 25 are fully vaccinated. That number is 27.7% of 26 to 30 year-olds and 35.3% of 31 to 35 year-olds.

Evetts said that one reason young people don't feel compelled to get vaccinated is because they saw COVID-19 affect mostly older people with health complications.

"I think some people perceive that perhaps this was disproportionately impacting those who were elderly and that because they're younger, they're not at risk," he said. "There's a lot of misinformation floating around."

While there were more deaths for older people in Pueblo County, people between 20 and 29 years old actually accounted for the highest number of positive cases with 3,584 cumulative positive cases since March 2020, according to data from PDPHE.

PDPHE recently released a series of videos featuring young Puebloans explaining why they chose to get the vaccine in an effort to reach teenagers and young adults, in partnership with the city and county government. The videos are short, sharable and feature high schoolers, college students and even one with players from the Pueblo Bulls. Three of them were produced by the Mayor's Youth Council.

"Younger people tend to utilize their phones differently. They tend to seek videos with that kind of information. So it was really an attempt to get them information where they seek it, to make it available and usable and relatable to their stage in life," Evetts said.

Vaccinations in Pueblo County moving forward

The county opened a state-run vaccination site at the Pueblo Mall on June 17. It will be open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays; which were the busiest times at the FEMA site.

People will still be able to drive up without an appointment.

Additionally, Evetts said the department hopes to use the state's mobile vaccination bus more often and do outreach clinics in settings like local businesses, churches and workplaces.

"Having friendly faces right at the entrance to greet people is often really helpful in calming people's fears," Trujillo said. That includes Spanish speakers and people of color.

Those outreach clinics can be a slower strategy but are often extremely effective.

"It makes it convenient for people," Evetts said. "It takes it to where they are. It breaks down any of those barriers for transportation."

Experts agree that part of combatting vaccine hesitancy is recruiting the help of community leaders to educate people about the effectiveness and safety of the shot. Sometimes it is better for people to hear that information from someone they know versus a public official, who Trujillo said often don't feel relevant to their lives.

"It's helpful hearing it from a trusted individual. Sometimes that's their clergy or it is their teacher or it is their grandmother," Evetts said.

As for Solano, her strategy is to educate and have vaccines available if and when a hesitant person decides they're ready, even if that means physically knocking on doors and doing grassroots canvassing. SCHRA plans to have multiple phases of vaccine outreach this summer, especially in preparation for a new school year.

"We're planting seeds. We may not have had this huge turnout in this go around, but we have three rounds of this through the summer."

At the end of the day, Solano said, getting vaccinated is a choice. She views it as her job to get information out there and make the process as easy as possible when people do decide.

"We're going to be here when that time comes."

Visit county.pueblo.org/public-health to find a COVID-19 vaccine provider near you.

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