



May 21, 2021

## Message to the African American Community in Northeast Ohio: Vaccinate and Continue to Mask up or Die

There are almost 600,000 African Americans living in Northeast Ohio. To date, approximately only 1 in 6 African Americans have been fully vaccinated, that's 22% of the NEO African American population.

The NEOBHC has attended the mass vaccination meetings every Friday, asking the tough questions about African American vaccinations: the who, what, why, and when. This is our charge to action as an organization. The Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition is a social justice organization created to address the impact of racism on African American disparities including policy inequities, historical trauma, food insecurity, research, health promotion, behavioral health and addiction, by working to empower, educate and advocate for health equity in under-served communities.

The Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition is charged with speaking out regarding the lack of funding for community-serving community-organizations regarding the engagement and rollout of the COVID-19 vaccinations. Vaccine education, empowerment and engagement are vitally important to the health of the NEO African American community. As an organization, we have participated on these calls because our strength is in our ability to work across multiple sectors of the community, providing a voice for communities often dismissed and ignored.

NEOBHC's strength is in its ability to work across multiple sectors using unified approaches regarding education, advocacy and empowerment utilizing partnerships to specifically meet the unique needs of African Americans who live, work, play and pray in Northeast Ohio. Our goal is to examine how political and social policies contribute to disease disparities in the African American community.

This week we discovered that COVID-19 is over. Not when science says it is over but when corporate interests say it is over. Forty-three percent of the 19,628 deaths due COVID-19 in Ohio were of residents of NE Ohio. Nationally, Blacks have contracted the virus at 2.9 times the rate of white Americans and have died at twice the rate (Center of Infectious Disease Research and Policy). Yet with all of the impact on the African American community, the glaring lens of racism shows up in our haste to open up. We ignore all science to get back to the new normal but nothing about this is normal. We don't have enough information to understand the nuances of this virus and the disproportionate impact on African Americans.

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Our very lives are at stake. We have been at a far greater risk of contracting COVID-19 through the duration of the pandemic. With the easing of restrictions statewide, the likelihood of disproportionate impact on African American communities increases, not decreases. Without more targeted interventions by local and state officials, African Americans are at a far greater risk of dying. African Americans in Northeast Ohio deserve a culturally proficient response to ensure equity at this crucial time. With respect to COVID 19 and efforts to vaccinate, underwhelming efforts are insufficient. Vaccination rates continue to remain low for African Americans in Northeast Ohio due to the lack of input from grass roots organizations that are based in the community. The fierce urgency of now must become the official modus operandi of local and state officials in ramping up outreach efforts. Funding must reach organizations working with at-risk communities. Funders need to understand that this is their moment to say we care about people, we care about people's lives. At this point, concentrated outreach efforts must concentrate on local institutions central to the core of African American communities. Haste makes waste, waste of precious lives, these efforts have dismissed local organizers for far too long. This is a clear reminder of the inequities that COVID-19 brought to light last year.

Funders need to ensure that boots on the ground organizations have the dollars that they need in order to save the lives of community members.

Since African Americans live in communities where they are most likely to interact with other African Americans it is important for them to know that this is not the time to take off their masks. It is important for us as a community to continue to wear a mask, social distance and wash our hands and our children's hands.

If you have not been vaccinated we want you to get a vaccination The low number of African Americans who have been vaccinated is why we need to get vaccinated

This is a call to action for the African American community!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Yvonka Hall". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'Y'.

Yvonka M. Hall, MPA  
Executive Director