

A Community-Centered Approach to Understanding Attitudes Towards Childhood Vaccines

Key Findings from the Childhood Vaccine Safety Project

Project Overview

The **Childhood Vaccine Safety Project** expands and enhances Community Catalyst's efforts to reduce disparities in the uptake of recommended vaccinations across the lifespan and build trust in the safety of recommended vaccinations among caregivers and parents of young children.

The **Childhood Vaccine Safety Project** was funded by the CDC's Vaccines for Children Program (VFC). The goal of the VFC Program is to ensure that a VFC Program-eligible child does not contract a vaccine-preventable disease because of their parent or guardian's inability to pay for the vaccine. The project is focused on promoting childhood vaccination awareness and safety. The Childhood Vaccine Safety Project outcomes included:

- Increasing knowledge of community-based partners on vaccine safety topics.
- Increasing the number of community-level spokespersons educated, empowered, on vaccine safety across the lifespan.
- Increasing the number of parents and caregivers educated about vaccine safety.

Through the learnings from these activities, Community Catalyst aimed to examine existing educational resources, inform the development of new resources, and create tools to improve parent and caregiver understanding of vaccine safety. The goal was to enhance confidence in childhood vaccines and increase vaccination rates among young children by distributing effective messaging through trusted channels and messengers.

Methods

- **Focus Groups:** Convened community-based organization (CBO) partners to engage in virtual focus groups to provide insights and their perceptions of child vaccination safety among parents and caregivers of young children in their communities. Two sessions with 21 representatives from 15 CBOs across 13 states explored community-level perceptions and experiences with childhood vaccinations.
- **Listening Sessions:** Identified CBO partners to host a community listening session with parents and caregivers of children to gain understanding of their beliefs and perceptions of child vaccination safety. In addition, collecting insights on the

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CDC's child vaccination safety messaging. Six communities engaged in these sessions captured insights from parents and caregivers, organized into vaccine acceptor categories (Acceptor, Hesitant, Late Selective). Community-based organizations that spearheaded the listening sessions included:

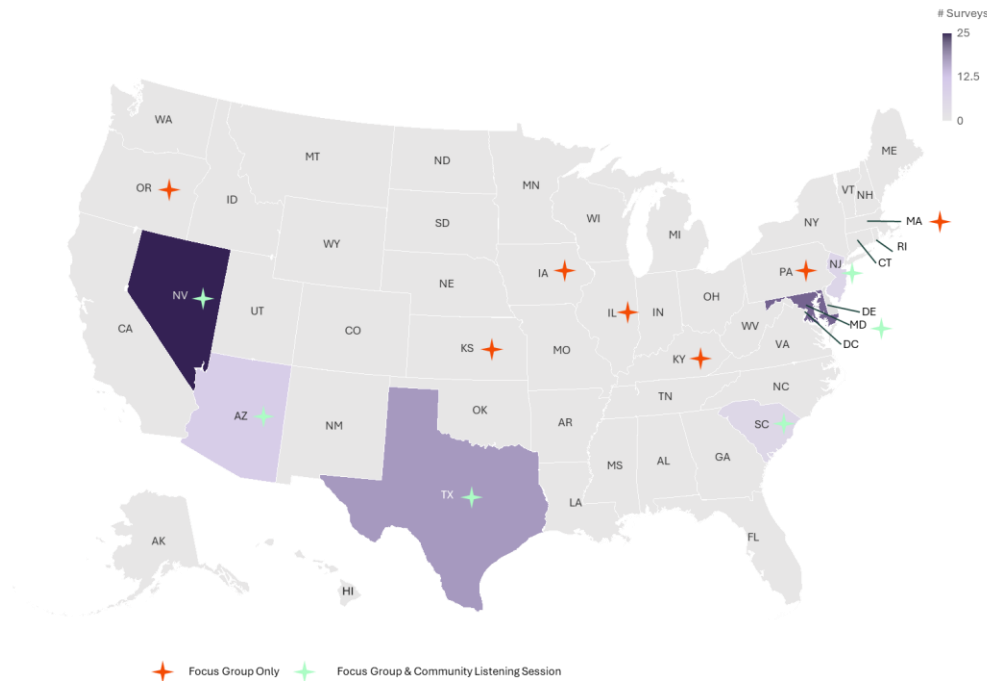
- **ELFA Empowerment**, session conducted in Tucson, AZ
 - **Melinated Moms**, session conducted in Beltsville, MD
 - **Make the Road New Jersey**, session conducted in Elizabeth, NJ
 - **Make the Road Nevada**, session conducted in Las Vegas, NV
 - **South Carolina Association of Community Action Partnerships**, session conducted in Newberry, SC
 - **YWCA San Antonio**, session conducted in San Antonio, TX
- **Parent and Caregiver Survey:** Disseminated a survey in communities and developed a report of findings and recommendations from the focus groups, community listening sessions, and surveys. The survey was distributed by CBOs in English, Spanish, and Arabic. The survey captured attitudes and beliefs of 84 eligible parents and caregivers.

Key Findings

Findings from the Child Vaccine Safety Project reveal a complex and layered landscape of perceptions, concerns, and behaviors surrounding childhood vaccinations among parents, caregivers, and CBO partners. The mixed-methods approach, which draws conclusions from focus groups, listening sessions, and a survey of 84 eligible participants, uncovered consistent themes of distrust, hesitancy, and demand for transparent communication across communities, particularly among vaccine-hesitant populations.

The evaluation highlights widespread support for vaccinations, especially those required for school, tempered by mistrust, misinformation, and limited transparency. Differences among acceptor groups reveal varying needs: Acceptors want assurance about effectiveness; Hesitant and Late Selective individuals need clearer information on safety, side effects, and monitoring protocols.

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Source: Understanding Parent and Caregiver Perceptions of Childhood Vaccinations survey, n=84; VEAP CBO partner database, n=16.

Main Highlights:

- Most parents/caregivers support vaccination, especially those needed for school and/or childcare. But trust issues remain.
- Vaccine-hesitant parents are not “anti-vax”; they want clear information about short and long-term side effects, vaccine testing, and vaccine risks vs. benefits.
- CBOs are essential trusted messengers for the delivery of accurate information in clear and culturally relevant ways.
- “One-size-fits-all” messaging is not effective. Messaging should be tailored to communities, there should be cultural considerations, and use of plain language.
- Community-based organizations are crucial allies in vaccine outreach. Their relationships, cultural competence, and proximity to underserved families position them as trusted channels to deliver clear, contextual, and resonant health information.
- The findings point to the need for a more responsive public health infrastructure that empowers families with knowledge, autonomy, and access, especially as misinformation continues to challenge vaccine confidence.

The graphic on page 4 provides additional key findings from the project activities.

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Conclusion

The Childhood Vaccine Safety Project underscores the importance of community voice in shaping effective, equitable vaccination outreach strategies. Acknowledging and addressing the nuanced safety concerns of diverse parent and caregiver groups, public health agencies and providers can build lasting trust and increase childhood vaccination confidence and uptake. To improve the belief that vaccines are safe, and to ultimately increase confidence and uptake, vaccine messaging must go beyond generic statements and consider concerns, myths, and dis/misinformation, and listen to the voice of parent and caregivers, and other trusted networks that influence their vaccine choices. Centering community voice, particularly from trusted CBO partners, and addressing the reasons behind hesitancy, allows public health to bridge the trust gap, by increasing vaccine safety education and expanding vaccine access for all children in both rural and urban communities.

Recommendations

- **Targeted Education Campaigns:** Develop tailored campaigns that address common myths and explain the safety, benefits, and testing of vaccines using plain language.
- **Strengthen Provider Communication:** Train pediatricians and healthcare providers to proactively explain vaccine risks, side effects, and benefits, including vaccine safety monitoring systems, before administration. Encourage open, empathetic conversations.
- **Empower CBOs as Messengers:** Fund and support CBO-led education efforts that deliver CDC-approved messages in varied resonant ways. Utilize trusted messengers from within communities.
- **Monitor and Respond to Dis/Misinformation:** Partner with social media platforms and community leaders to track and address false claims. Offer timely, evidence-based counter-messaging.
- **Support and Flexibility:** Advocate for flexibility in vaccine schedules to build parent trust and reduce stress.

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Additional Key Findings from Project Activities

15

CBO partners engaged in focus group discussions

6

CBO partners hosted community listening sessions

84

parents and caregivers completed an online survey

CHILD VACCINE ATTITUDES & INFLUENCES

54%

survey respondents were vaccine acceptors

Top factors influencing vaccine decisions

67%

Vaccine safety and side effects

60%

Vaccine effectiveness

58%

Vaccine benefits

CHILD VACCINE CONCERNS & BARRIERS

67%

respondents were concerned about vaccine safety and side effects

Other Concerns & Barriers

- Distrust in government
- Fear of medical settings
- Preference for natural immunity
- Financial and access barriers
- Social pressure to vaccinate

TRUSTED SOURCES OF INFORMATION

67%

respondents indicate pediatricians are the most trusted source of child vaccine information

Other Trusted Sources

33% CDC

31% LHD

27% SHD

68%

parents and caregivers ever received information on side effects

57%

parents and caregivers had education on reporting side effects

48%

parents and caregivers are aware of vaccine safety monitoring systems

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

96% female

42% 40-49 years

41% White

29% Hispanic/Latino/a/x

45% Child <5 yrs

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Project Team

Community Catalyst: Sheree Keitt, DrPH, MPH, CHES, Daisha Bonhomme, MS, Nicolle Cross, MPH, CHES and Hida Reese

Trifecta Advising, LLC (Evaluator): Calondra Tibbs, MPH and Tiffany Young, Ph.D., MA

Contact

For additional information or copy of full evaluation report, please contact the Community-First Public Health team at CFPH@communitycatalyst.org.

VEAP was funded by the Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Award # 6NH231P22653-01-01. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funder.