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Community faith, health leaders address concerns about vaccine

By Kaitlin Durbin / The Blade
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Though the coronavirus vaccine is not widely available to the public, health and community officials continue to push the importance and safety of it in preparation for when it is.

VProject, a community-driven organization that stresses “Victory over COVID-19 through Vaccination,” has been bringing together community, faith, business, government, and health officials to champion the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines and answer lingering questions people may have about the safety and necessity of it.

Because while the organization says it understands there are reasons why some residents may not want to get vaccinated, being misinformed shouldn't be one of them

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“We know that you are ultimately the ones that are going to make the decision and you’re going to have to filter through what is wise for you and your family,” Ben Snyder, lead pastor with CedarCreek Church, said during the most recent Interfaith Summit last week. “What we want to do is help answer some of those questions that may be unnecessary boundaries, barriers keeping you from making that next step.”



A screenshot of the VProject Interfaith Summit held Feb. 16 to address questions about the coronavirus vaccine.

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Ultimately, the goal is to encourage at least 70 percent of Lucas County’s population to receive the shot — the threshold medical professionals say a community needs to reach to achieve herd immunity. VProject has set the added goal of making Lucas County the No. 1 vaccinated county in the Midwest.

The only way to achieve that goal, the organization said, is through education and trust, tenants hoped to merge during the Interfaith Summit.

Six faith leaders from Jewish, Islamic, Catholic, Hindu, and Christian backgrounds all took to the mic to agree that there are no religious objections that might prevent their congregations from wanting the shot.

“Rest assured that the mRNA vaccine now being distributed...is 100 percent ethical and we should recognize that as people of faith that we should be encouraged to take that...” Ahmad Deeb, imam and director of religious affairs of the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo, said.

But they did have other medical concerns they wanted health professionals to address. The following is an edited version of some those questions and answers:

Can we trust the vaccine, especially considering how quickly it was developed?

This question is especially critical in the Black community, which already has a deep-seated distrust of the medical community, largely stemming from experiences like the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study, which left Black men to suffer from the disease. Because also in that case, it was local leaders, church leaders, and medical professionals encouraging the men to participate.

Dr. Anthony Armstrong, who is Black and specializes in women's health at Mercy Health, recognized the study as an "epic failure of the United States' public health system," but said it bears no resemblance to the science behind developing the coronavirus vaccine.

"One of the things to be of note is that the study population for the [coronavirus] vaccine that was trialed in, was very large and robust and very diverse," Dr. Armstrong said, adding that the Moderna vaccine's lead developer, Dr. Kizzmekia Corbett, is an African American.

Combined, the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines were tested on about 70,000 participants before being approved for the general public. Health officials, for months, have also been advocating the safety and efficacy of the vaccine, even agreeing to get it first.

Ultimately, medical professionals make decisions about which interventions are best for patients based on available data, Dr. Nadia Ashraf-Moghal, an infectious disease specialist with ProMedica, said. The data behind the vaccine shows it to be "very safe and efficient," she said; more so, even, than some of the other vaccines in use.

This year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that 193.6 million people received their flu vaccine, though it only offers a 40-60 percent chance of preventing the flu. The coronavirus vaccine, however, offers 95 percent efficacy.

"That's huge," Dr. Ashraf-Moghal said.

I've already had coronavirus, do I still need to be vaccinated?

In short, yes, Wood County Health Commissioner Ben Robison said.

While studies have shown having the virus provides some level of natural immunity, making reinfection less likely, but that protection is only known to last about 90 days. However, there have been some cases where individuals were reinfected within that window.

What's more, it's not known yet whether having one strain of the coronavirus will protect a person against the mutant, more contagious strains evolving.

“This is why, even if you’ve been infected previously and you’ve recovered, it’s still really important for you to take the opportunity to be vaccinated to ensure your immune system continues to operate in an optimum fashion moving forward,” Mr. Robison said.

What kind of side effects may I experience from the vaccine?

The most commonly reported side effect, after getting the vaccine, is pain near the injection site, Dr. Ashraf-Moghal said.

But others have also reported muscle soreness, fever, chills, headache, and fatigue, which all are normal signs that the vaccine is working, she said, recommending treating them with Tylenol or Motrin.

Such side effects are known to occur most often following a person’s second dose, which is needed in order to achieve 95 percent efficacy, and, perhaps surprisingly, in younger recipients.

“Patients more than 65 years have mounted less immune reaction, therefore they experience these symptoms less,” Dr. Ashraf-Moghal said.

In rare cases, there have also been some more dangerous side effects, including anaphylaxis, a severe allergic reaction to the ingredients, but she said that occurs in only “10 out of a million persons.” If everyone waits to be monitored for 15 minutes after getting their vaccine, this should catch any life-threatening reaction.

Why does at least 70 percent of the population need to be vaccinated?

Those who get the vaccine can help protect those who cannot or choose not to through herd immunity, Mr. Robison said.

When enough people — in this case, an estimated 70 percent of the population — become immune to a disease, it makes the spread of that disease in a community less likely. That then protects those who cannot get the vaccine for medical reasons, choose not to for personal reasons, and others who may not yet be eligible.

Moderna’s vaccine, for example, has not been authorized for those under the age of 18. Pfizer’s age limit is 16. Both companies have begun clinical trials for younger populations, down to age 5 or 6, in Pfizer’s case, but it still would not cover every age group.

“So as of right now, we have a whole generation of people that can’t be vaccinated,” Mr. Robison said. “We’re seeing significant impacts on our young children as they’re

...experiencing these chronic conditions following even mild cases of COVID, so keeping our kids safe is something we can do by being vaccinated.”

He likened the vaccine to a community airbag that, when deployed at the same time, will lessen the impact of a virus. Then, if the vaccine should become less effective later, it wouldn't matter as much because the disease would have largely died out.

“When we start to see cases decline at a community level, and the disease not spreading from person to person on a broad scale, that's when we start to think about a full recovery: returning our economy to the way it was before COVID, returning our family activities and our schools and our businesses to the way they were, and reimagining life as we knew it before COVID hit us more than a year ago,” Mr. Robison said. “That 70 percent threshold is going to position us for those sort of outcomes that we want that just cannot be accomplished if just I am protected.”

The full Interfaith Summit can be viewed on VProject's Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/vproject.nwo/>). It also will be aired at 8 p.m. on Thursday and again at 1 p.m. on Friday on WGTE-TV Channel 30.

VProject is also hosting a discussion on vaccine hesitancy and the roots of medical mistrust with the African American Leadership Council of United Way at 12 p.m. on March 11. The one-hour event will be streamed live from the Council's Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/AALCofUW/>).



Kaitlin Durbin | BLADE STAFF WRITER

[@njKaitlinDurbin](https://twitter.com/njKaitlinDurbin) (<https://twitter.com/njKaitlinDurbin>)
(<mailto:kdurbin@theblade.com>)

[✉ kdurbin@theblade.com](mailto:kdurbin@theblade.com)

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