Faith Leaders Who Promoted COVID-19 Vaccines Pivot to Fight HIV

An expanded HIV Vaccine Trials Network Faith Initiative aims to reach Black, Latino and Indigenous communities of faith. [VIDEO]

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Faith leaders who successfully encouraged their communities to get vaccinated against COVID-19 and enroll in vaccine trials now hope to engage their congregations in the fight against HIV.

When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in 2020, a team of federal health leaders formed the COVID-19 Prevention Network (CoVPN) to counter the misinformation regarding the novel coronavirus and the mistrust of vaccine efforts. CoVPN, in turn, launched a faith initiative to reach out to minority communities at higher risk for severe COVID-19. That program worked with "faith ambassadors" and "clergy-consultants" who were prevalent in the nation's African-American, Latino and Indigenous communities and who promoted updated, science-based information on COVID-19.

On the heels of that success, the HIV Vaccine Trials Network (HVTN), a CoVPN partner program, has expanded its own faith initiative to further engage faith communities in HIV vaccine clinical trials.

"Faith communities still possess a significant amount of community capital and trust, perhaps maybe more so than the health care systems in communities of color, and so we understand the power within those spaces," Ulysses Burley, MD, who leads the HVTN Faith Initiative, told TheDenverChannel.com. You can watch the interview with him below:

Burley is the founder of a Chicago-based consulting firm focused on the intersection of faith, health and human rights. Burley has years of experience working in HIV and religion and served on the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS under Obama but was one of several PACHA members to resign in 2017 because Trump, in their words, didn't care about HIV. According to an HVTN press release, UBtheCURE will build on the CoVPN model and direct the expanded HIV vaccine faith program.

Based at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, HVTN conducts clinical trials worldwide in search of an effective HIV vaccine. The network launched over 20 years ago, but when COVID-19 swept the globe, HVTN and three other networks of clinical trial researchers formed the COVID-19 Prevention Network. Today, with the development of effective COVID-19 vaccines, attention can once again be directed toward HIV research.

"We hope through the expansion of the HVTN Faith Initiative, we can find success like we did with COVID," said Stephaun Wallace, PhD, MS, director of external relations, CoVPN/HVTN, at Fred Hutch, in the press release. The COVID-19 vaccine efforts were successful, he said, because the clinical trials that helped develop them included the communities most impacted by the coronavirus.

"It's not just about sharing information," Burley said in the Denver Channel interview. "It's about sharing information in an accessible way specific to the communities that need that information, and that involves a level of what we generally term as 'cultural competency.' But I prefer to expound on that to say 'cultural humility,' where it's not just an understanding of one's culture, but a respect for one's culture."

In related news, check out this article that debunks nine myths about HIV cure research, such as

“If they can develop a vaccine for COVID-19 so fast, they can do it for HIV too.” And to read a collection of POZ articles on the intersection of the coronavirus and HIV, click the hashtag #COVID-19.

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