

# They knocked on strangers' doors and persuaded naysayers to get the COVID-19 vaccine. Here are their tips

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When Armani Nightengale waited in the car last March to get vaccinated against COVID-19 at Chicago's United Center, her husband was more

nervous than she was.

Over the next couple of weeks, he carefully checked her arm to make sure nothing looked wrong. Then, the [conversation](#) shifted to when he would get the shot.

That's when things got more "combative," Nightengale said, as she began asking why he was reluctant, especially given that they had three young children. Her husband, on the other hand, felt unsure about how signing up for the vaccine would affect his immigration status.

But in December, after months of evolving conversations on the benefits of getting inoculated, he agreed.

"I was speaking as an African American woman who was born and raised in America; he is a white male from Europe," said Nightengale, a 26-year-old who lives in South Shore. "So it was like, how do we combine these two conversations?"

Nightengale is used to these high-stakes discussions as a member of Chicago's COVID-19 Community Response Corps. She is one of about 800 Chicagoans hired by the city for tasks ranging from contact tracing to monitoring the coronavirus hotline to promoting the vaccine through canvassing neighborhoods.

All members are required to take a free class with Chicago Department of Public Health and City Colleges of Chicago to learn effective messaging on COVID-19 vaccines. About 3,000 people have completed the two-hour "vaccine ambassador" course, hundreds of whom are part of the city's COVID-19 response team. Others are just ordinary residents from Chicago and elsewhere, said the city's public health Commissioner Dr. Allison Arwady.

The lesson covers the roots of vaccine doubt and its ties to historical racism in the U.S. medical field, as well as answers to vaccine questions and best practices for difficult conversations.

Arwady said it's one way the city is equipping everyday Chicagoans to spark dialog with unvaccinated loved ones who may be more likely to trust a familiar face versus a government official.

People who are vaccinated and boosted are far less likely to be hospitalized with or die from COVID-19.

"If you're somebody who's already been vaccinated, great, but you're not done," Arwady said, "We need you to talk about that with people."

## **Starting the dialog**

Several COVID-19 response corps members spoke with the Tribune about tips they learned from both the vaccine ambassador course as well as their own experience with door-knocking and personal relationships. They agreed on approaching the discussions with a long-term mindset, keeping the tone respectful and knowing when to walk away from a combative atmosphere.

"This conversation is not typically a one-time conversation," Arwady said. "It's more important to keep those lines of communication open."

Nightengale said her first question when she meets a vaccine-hesitant person is, "Why?" Many times, people just desire someone to listen to their fears without bombarding them with immediate criticism, she said. It's also important to gage where that distrust comes from because many times, it'll surprise you.

"You open up a dialog, right? It's no shame, it's no judgment."

Nightengale said. "A lot of times when you're able to validate them and give them a chance to speak, they'll also be willing to listen to you."

Caesar Thompson, a COVID-19 response corps member, said he learned that some people are not resistant to the vaccine but indifferent toward it. The 44-year-old from South Deering said his predominantly working-class Chicago neighbors don't always have COVID-19 high on their list of concerns.

For example, several unvaccinated people Thompson met simply didn't know the city offered at-home appointments and as a result, they put off getting the shot because of transportation issues, he said.

"Maybe if you live in my neighborhood, you might not even have a job or even have health insurance," Thompson said. "So you don't have a regular doctor. You don't have continuity of care. You don't have trust in doctors, and so you're much more susceptible to misinformation."

## **'Don't fight fire with fire'**

Thompson also acknowledges that when it comes to close friends and family, it's easy for a casual chat to escalate into an argument. When that happens, it's important to take no for an answer.

Marisol Alfaro, a member of the COVID-19 response corps who works in West Lawn, said one method of staying calm is to not to take rejection personally.

"If they say no, walk away," Alfaro, 46, said. "That's it, right? Don't fight fire with fire."

But such composure is often easier said than done for vaccinated Americans who believe they have done their part and are losing patience

with the rest of the country. It doesn't help that being unvaccinated has morphed into a political identity either, Arwady said.

"The way this has landed in the U.S. is indicative of, like, much deeper, larger problems in our political discourse," Arwady said about the topic of vaccination. "But at the end of the day, we don't make progress by further polarizing the conversation."

One strategy for tamping down emotions is to take conversations off social media, Arwady said. Although it may be tempting to directly comment on a negative post about vaccines, such a public spat usually leads to both sides digging their heels in.

"As opposed to piling on to the Twitter thread or the Facebook feed or whatever, actually just reach out to the person, private message them," Arwady said.

## **Keeping the conversation going**

Arwady said above all, nothing is more persuasive than seeing others make the choice to be vaccinated first. She regularly strikes up conversations with strangers on the train and beyond about why she got the shot, and she said that has swayed some of them.

During one 2021 city event featuring CDPH's vaccination bus, one man asked for Arwady's autograph. She told him she'd comply after he listened to her talk about the vaccine.

"I was like, 'I'm just going to be straight with you. I have been vaccinated myself, and I think it's the most important thing to protect your health,'" Arwady said.

Later that day, he waved a fresh [vaccine](#) card in front of her face.

"I was like, 'You got to be kidding me,'" Arwady said. "But you just never know. ... You are doing the best you can if you can just keep having the conversation with people."

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