

# Community health van increases access to a vaccine that helps to prevent six types of cancer

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Pictured from left to right:: Medical University of South Carolina Hollings Cancer Center community health van team members Mina Platt, Dr. Marvella Ford, Melanie Slan and Joan McLauren. Credit: Medical University of South Carolina

In a joint initiative that includes Hollings Cancer Center and the Department of Pediatrics, MUSC researchers launched a community mobile health van in 2021 to help to increase access to human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination in underserved communities.

HPV is linked to six different kinds of cancer, including cervical, throat, anal, penile, vaginal and vulvar, and [almost 40,000 new cancer cases](#) each year in the U.S. Fortunately, a safe and effective [vaccine](#) is available for those between the ages of 9 and 45 to help to prevent these cancers.

"This is one of the few opportunities where we can prevent cancer with a vaccine," said Hollings Cancer Center researcher Marvella Ford, Ph.D., associate director of Population Science and Community Outreach and Engagement.

In 2016, South Carolina ranked last in the U.S. in HPV vaccination rates. This alarming statistic led to an initiative by pediatricians from across the state and MUSC Hollings Cancer Center to increase access to and uptake of the vaccine.

"The fact that South Carolina was the last in the country for HPV vaccination prompted a lot of effort among a lot of South Carolina pediatric practices to improve the HPV vaccination rate," said MUSC Children's Health pediatrician James Roberts, M.D.

To complement those efforts, Ford and Roberts teamed up to launch the MUSC Hollings community [health](#) van in October of 2021 with funding from Healthy Me-Healthy South Carolina and the South Carolina Clinical and Translational Research Institute. Ford and Roberts had noted that some of the lowest rates of vaccination were seen in the state's underserved and [rural communities](#). The community health van travels to these communities, providing access to the HPV vaccine and other

childhood vaccines. The MUSC team reports encouraging data from the first year of the program in a recent article in the *Journal of Clinical Medicine*.

Although the vaccine can be given between the ages of 9 and 45, the community health van focuses on vaccinating children between the ages of 9 and 18 because the vaccine is more effective when given at an earlier age, and medically underserved children in this age group are covered by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Vaccines for Children Program. Both girls and boys are vaccinated.

"People sometimes think this vaccine is only for girls and women, but it is important for everyone to receive the vaccine," said Ford.

Roberts points out that the vaccine is extremely safe because it contains no actual virus, only virus-like particles, meaning there is no chance of infection from the vaccine. These [virus-like particles](#) trigger the body's defense, or immune system, and readies it to fight against future HPV infection.

In its first year, the community health van reached children in 21 of South Carolina's 46 counties. The initiative began at a town hall meeting in Cherokee County, which had the lowest HPV vaccination rate in the state. Local community members gave testimonials about the importance of HPV vaccination, and the MUSC team answered questions. A video of this townhall event was made available to many other school districts across the state and has been watched more than 6,000 times.

Building on these [early successes](#), Ford and Roberts hope to continue to expand the initiative to other counties in the state by partnering with school districts and community champions. The initiative includes educational sessions with parents of children eligible to receive the vaccine. During these sessions, researchers will evaluate parents'

perceptions, attitudes and beliefs about the HPV vaccine as well as their intentions to get their children vaccinated.

The community health van team also hopes to build on existing partnerships, such as that of MUSC and South Carolina State University, a historically Black university. The institutions jointly run the South Carolina Cancer Disparities Research Center (SC CADRE), which aims to build [cancer](#) health equity through research. SC CADRE provides selected SCSU students, known as scholars, the opportunity to join research teams at MUSC during the summer. One of those scholars, I'Ayana Sanders, is a co-author of the article and will help to enter and analyze data from the pre- and post-HPV educational sessions with parents to analyze the efficacy of the intervention.

Thanks to the combined efforts of pediatricians across the state and MUSC initiatives like the community health van, HPV vaccination rates in South Carolina are now on par with those of other states.

**More information:** Marvella E. Ford et al, Evaluation of the First-Year Data from an HPV Vaccination Van Program in South Carolina, U.S., *Journal of Clinical Medicine* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/jcm12041362](https://doi.org/10.3390/jcm12041362)

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