

What employers can do to boost COVID-19 vaccine equity

JUN 2, 2021



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Employers can help ensure the equitable administration of COVID-19 vaccinations by making it as easy as possible for their employees to get one.

“We’ve learned that [workplace outbreaks](#) have been a major contributor to community surges of COVID-19,” said Marina Del Rios, MD, a panelist during a recent episode of the [AMA “Prioritizing Equity” video series](#) that examines why [employers should be as invested as the government](#) and the health care community in ensuring equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines.

Dr. Del Rios, director of social emergency medicine at the University of Illinois College of Medicine in Chicago, co-wrote [an op-ed column in USA Today](#) with AMA Chief Health Equity Officer and Senior Vice President [Aletha Maybank, MD, MPH](#), on the essential role of employers in providing workers’ access to vaccines. Dr. Maybank served as moderator of the panel.

“Throughout this pandemic, the U.S. workforce has experienced inequities in access to protections related to COVID-19, including PPE [personal protection equipment], viral testing and health care,” their column says. “We can’t make the same mistake with the COVID-19 vaccine.”

3 steps employers should take

In the essay and the “Prioritizing Equity” video, Dr. Del Rios listed three ways employers can help ensure equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines.

Host onsite vaccination, which was described as “the easiest way to ensure that all workers have access to vaccines and vaccine-related care, including essential workers and low-wage earners.” The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has prepared [guidance](#) to assist in the planning and implementation for a temporary or satellite vaccination clinic.

Give paid time off for all workers to get vaccinated and, if needed, time to recover from any side effects. While the vaccine may be free, employers should cover associated expenses such as transportation, childcare or lost tip income. “Ensure that people don’t see their economic stability as a barrier to access the COVID-19 vaccine,” said Dr. Del Rios, an associate professor of clinical emergency medicine at UIC.

Distribute vaccine information to employees that is credible, culturally competent, evidence-based and up to date and that accurately answers questions about the safety and efficacy of vaccines.

Panelist Kyu Rhee, MD, chief medical officer for Aetna and senior vice president for CVS Health, said recent surveys by his company found that 35% of African Americans do not plan to get the COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes first available to them, up nine percentage points from a November survey; and 22% of Hispanics don’t plan to do so, up five percentage points from the last survey.

“We still have a lot of work to do in our communities and as a country to address this issue,” said Dr. Rhee.

Dr. Del Rios noted that migrant and undocumented workers face language barriers, technology barriers and “poverty barriers” that prevent them from missing work to get a vaccine, staying home when they are ill or staying away when they don’t feel safe.

“They’ve had to choose between going hungry or [risk] getting sick,” she said. “And ‘going hungry’ almost always means—not only for themselves—but for an entire household so many of them have continued to put themselves in harm’s way.”

Employee, economic health linked

Last fall, Dr. Rhee wrote an article for Fortune magazine that referenced IBM’s “TechQuity” policy of using technology to advance health equity and reduce inequities. Now, he said, “every organization is a health organization” as companies recognize their responsibility to create a culture of health and equity as a company’s economic health gets linked to employee, customer, community and environmental health.

“So much of the challenges of opening up borders and opening up businesses are going to be tied to how confident a customer feels in taking a flight, going into a hotel or going into a store,” he said.

Dr. Del Rios noted that mental health is also part of this equation now, even though there is still a stigma attached to seeking help—especially for health professionals.

“I would like to see people having better access to getting mental health care, to getting access to medications, to therapy and to taking time off to recover just like you would recover from surgery,” she said.