



Joint News Release

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For Immediate Release

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Collaboration of organizations in Southwest Michigan join forces to increase COVID-19 vaccination rates, combat misinformation

(Benton Harbor, Michigan) – The Berrien County Health Department, United Way of Southwest Michigan, and Van Buren-Cass District Health Department, are joining forces to increase COVID-19 vaccination rates through the mobilization of individuals and nonprofits to combat misinformation and reach those who remain hesitant to the vaccine throughout Southwest Michigan.

The organizations are recruiting “vaccine champions” – individuals and nonprofits – who will educate communities on the importance of the vaccine to increase uptake in individuals who are vaccine hesitant and vulnerable to COVID-19 transmission and infection. The champions will be provided training and tools on effective outreach tactics, assistance in identifying areas with lower vaccine confidence, and monthly stipends or mini-grant awards to increase their capacity. Champions will be asked to open conversations about the COVID-19 vaccines through activities like door-to-door outreach, sharing vaccine information within circles of influence, in-person and/or on social media, drive friends to vaccination appointments, or help coordinate and/or host a vaccine clinic. This new grassroots engagement strategy will include partnerships and trusted messengers to for allow accurate, easy-to-understand health information to permeate throughout communities, with the ultimate goal of striving towards higher vaccination rates for the tri-county region.

Vaccination coverage rates vary by county in Southwest Michigan; currently, in Berrien County, 53.7% of the population over the age of 12 has initiated vaccination. Van Buren County has 56.5% of the eligible population with at least one dose and Cass County’s rate is 37.7%. “While we’ve made incredible progress in decreasing COVID-19 transmission in our area, due to the protective effects of the vaccines, we know we must continue our efforts to build greater community-wide protection against the virus,” said Courtney Davis, acting health officer, Berrien County Health Department. “This initiative will help us increase vaccination rates as well as slow the spread of health misinformation that causes confusion, harms people’s health, and undermines public health efforts.” Danielle Persky, health officer for the Van Buren-Cass District Health Department said, “There are many benefits to working collectively towards a

common goal across the tri-county area and we hope having a shared message and aligned outreach will increase the effectiveness of our message."

Individuals and nonprofits who are interested in participating as a vaccine champion can complete an online application at volunteer.uwsm.org or call 269.932.3566. Applications are being accepted until August 9th, and champions identified will be asked to attend a training offered in mid-August. Specific details and dates can be found at volunteer.uwsm.org.

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