

New COVID-19 Relief Fund Initiative



by Yurianna Mikolay, Executive Director Ocean Reef Community Foundation

You might be surprised to read that, almost 15 months in, the Foundation's COVID-19 Relief Fund is still actively meeting changing needs created by the pandemic in our surrounding communities. Thanks to the Ocean Reef Community's generosity, our efforts have seen thousands of people sustained and helped back on their feet in the first phase and thousands more vaccinated in the second phase. We have pivoted again in the latest phase of our response.

Changing Challenges

Where once it was a struggle to get vaccine at all, today "Demand for Vaccination is Dropping in the Keys" according to a recent headline in Keys Weekly. The article detailed how mass vaccination efforts were winding down with only 40% of Keys residents fully vaccinated.

Vaccination programs are also wrapping up in Miami-Dade County, where the Miami Herald recently found that vaccination rates were 30% lower in ZIP codes where more than a quarter of residents live in poverty. The article features a graphic showing large swaths of Homestead where the poverty rate is over 40% and the vaccination rate was under 29%. Homestead and Florida City, home to the majority of the people who work in the Ocean Reef Community, were included in a list of South Florida communities with the

lowest vaccination rates.

The reluctance to vaccinate we are seeing is very concerning considering the science tells us that low vaccination rates could allow COVID-19 to rebound and form new variants and high vaccination rates will be critical to keeping it under control, especially next fall and winter.

Unfortunately, there's no quick or easy fix for "vaccine hesitancy". The Herald piece does a great job of describing the substantial "complex range of emotional reasoning and logistical hurdles" that will need to be overcome to achieve higher vaccination rates.

Partnerships & Response

Our most recent collaboration aims to address those hurdles comprehensively by enlisting the health experts at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, the well-established community conveners of United Way of Miami Dade, and two cooperative counties to help direct vaccine where the program creates demand. UM leads the Florida Community Engagement Alliance program, which contends with disparities in COVID infection and impact, counters misinformation, and eliminates barriers to care and vaccination through active community engagement and outreach.

The new Ocean Reef Community Foundation COVID-19 Health Fund at UM is a broad initiative that brings culturally informed education and services specifically to our interest areas of Homestead, Florida City and the Upper Keys. Focused on medically underserved individuals who do not have access to the formal healthcare system, over 18 months the fund will provide education on COVID risks and preventing the virus; conduct COVID testing; implement a campaign to overcome vaccine

hesitancy and promote vaccine uptake; navigate people to vaccination opportunities; and create new vaccination opportunities with a mobile unit and through county partnerships.

This intensive project includes a highly trained team of community health workers (CHWs), trusted members of the community who will meet folks where they are and provide care and information in three languages and a culturally informed manner. Involving CHWs in developing and delivering health interventions has proven effective in overcoming mistrust in the healthcare system and counteracting misinformation.

An additional grant to the United Way of Miami Dade is also leveraging their strong relationships in the community to help bring the UM team

into the heart of the many local organizations that residents know and trust over 10 months. Along with managing a complementary outreach program engaging five key non-profit partners, United Way is also providing transportation to vaccination points of distribution through an arrangement with Uber. United Way and UM will continue to coordinate closely with the Foundation and our grantee partners to have maximum impact and reach.

Stay safe and stay tuned for additional similar solutions and partnerships for more of Monroe County in the works for what we are hopeful is the final phase of the COVID-19 Relief effort!

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