



COVID-19 Vaccination Messaging Guide

INTRODUCTION

In January 2021, Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI) published the results of a [survey](#), Strengthening Vaccine Efforts in Indian Country, conducted with over 1400 Native peoples representing 318 tribes on attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge of the COVID-19 vaccines. As part of ILLUMINATIVE and UIHI's formation of a national campaign to educate and encourage Native peoples about options around the vaccine, we worked with N8tv Insights to conduct four focus groups to further understand attitudes and beliefs about the vaccines and to test drafted messages with participants.

The focus groups were conducted in four regions identified in the UIHI survey: the California and Great Plains (North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Nebraska) regions which were identified as regions with “high hesitancy” attitudes towards the COVID-19 vaccines and two regions with “high acceptance” attitudes, the Phoenix Area (Utah, Arizona, and Nevada) and Bemidji Area (Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin).

PURPOSE OF MESSAGING GUIDE

Moments of crisis influence our actions oftentimes igniting our deepest fears and create room for misinformation to spread. How we act and what we say in the moment can define perception and ultimately save lives. This memo outlines insights and ideas from the focus groups conducted via phone between February 16, 2021 and March 3, 2021, as well as a revised message based on the insights and ideas. We encourage partners to consider the insights outlined in the memo and to incorporate the messaging suggestions when crafting messages around the COVID-19 vaccine for Native Americans, creating content, or when disseminating information.

FOCUS GROUP INSIGHTS

There are a number of take-aways from the focus groups that can help inform not just the messages used in the campaign, but also the means and methods of how they are communicated. The insights are provided below along with ideas for how they can be incorporated.

INSIGHT 1: Center community.

In every single focus group, the top priority on everyone's mind is the protection of their communities. This is a multifaceted insight, and it is important to consider each angle.

Participants reported getting the vaccine, or planning to get the vaccine, because of community. This included protecting elders and making sure they are around in the future for their relatives and preserving and passing on culture and spirituality.

"I am eligible and did take the vaccination. And when it comes down to it, I was thinking of my family. I have children in my house and what I was thinking of is what if I got COVID and brought it home to my kids? I'm the person that goes out and does the grocery shopping. I'm the person that has to go out for work and I leave my children isolated at home, and that's my biggest fear is that I will give it to my children or my elderly parents, and they will die from it. So I was like, this is one way I can prevent that or try to prevent it." –Participant

Community was also a persuasive force for participants, inspiring, and sometimes demanding, that people get vaccinated. Participants reported that their children were making it a requirement in order to see grandchildren, and a mother said she was inspired by her teenage children who said they would get the vaccine if they were eligible.

"What mostly influenced me (to get vaccinated) was my grandmother because she's very sickly and I'm around her a lot. And also, my daughter, I did it for my daughter. I don't want her to get sick." –Participant

Across focus groups, people reported trusting public health officials like their local public health department or Dr. Fauci. However, due to high distrust of the government and pharmaceutical companies, and doctors or officials too closely connected to those two institutions, Native public health officials are seen as some of the most trusted and effective messengers.

"I try to follow folks on Twitter who are scientific and indigenous scientists and who are, plain talkers that can break down a lot of the pieces that I don't understand, cause I'm not a scientist or an epidemiologist or a biologist or anything. But I look for the folks who are trying to translate the information to the public that are working in that (field)." –Participant

"Do your part" was very well received.

Ideas for Messaging. Centering "community" is going to be the most effective message strategy that will have broad appeal when discussing the importance of. This strategy can lead to a strong brand and core message as well as tailored messages for different mindsets that the rest of the insights reveal.

Ideas for Communications Methods. This insight also indicates that a key tactic of communication dissemination should be telling an array of "everyday people" stories or "vaccination journeys." Since people are relying on the influence of friends and family, these can be direct, personal, and low-budget ways to communicate about the importance of protecting each other.

One participant said they try to follow Indigenous scientists on Twitter to break things down for them. It is unclear whether or not there are specific individuals they are referring to. Other participants said a woman in their community does Facebook Live chats on Sunday evenings to discuss the state of the pandemic. **It would be worthwhile to identify these individuals to collaborate with, and certainly putting Abigail front and center will be an important tactic as well.**

INSIGHT 2: Lead with positivity.

Time and again, focus group participants called out language that was even remotely negative. Even in the messages which used historical information or acknowledged systemic failures that have led to the disproportionate impact of COVID on Native communities, participants reacted poorly.

"I didn't like the way it started out with a negative... if I see a negative right away, I'm less inclined to keep on reading." –Participant

"I think reminding people of the loss that has already occurred. I just don't even like to think about it at this point anymore because it's just, it's just been thrown in our faces in the media." –Participant

"The part about "protect our communities and our way of life" To me, that brought it all back to the importance of who we are as native people... we come from generations of strength. And so just focusing on that was empowering." –Participant

This also included language that was perceived to be too emotionally charged, or could be construed as being manipulative, judgmental, or shaming the audience. One participant even questioned the description of elders as “vulnerable” and suggested to remove that to improve the message.

"...about the loss of tribal elders and knowledge keepers from COVID-19. And then the second sentence says 'we can't stand to lose our sacred language.' 'The part that gets me about that is both those sentences are in the negative. The word 'loss' and 'we can't stand to lose' that's in the negative, right? That's a negative connotation. If it were me, and I'm trying to make an impactful statement, I would prefer to hear words that are positive." –Participant

Idea for Messaging. The first impression lasts, so it is important to start all messaging with a positive frame. As the previous insight suggests, a positive, community frame is likely the ideal direction for future messages.

INSIGHT 3: Take caution with “ancestor” and “warrior” language.

In every focus group, participants were split on the use of language like “Be a good ancestor,” “join thousands of warriors,” and “knowledge-keepers.” Some liked these references, but those that did not were strong in their sentiment, citing multiple concerns.

“The whole “be a good ancestor” ... “Join the thousands of warriors across the country” ... I just feel that it’s specifically targeting a very vulnerable section of our community. And suggesting that this is the way you warrior up despite other parts of their lives. It’s totally cultural misappropriation and cultural pimping.”
–Participant

“Ancestor” language was seen as being a misuse of an important concept, making people who are young feel uncomfortable, or being manipulative.

“It says, ‘be a good ancestor.’ I get that, but I wish that was different wording just because I’m not passed away yet. So, um, something that’s like more present and current.” –Participant

“Warrior” language was seen as manipulating vulnerable people or sounding too much like an U.S. Army reference.

“Join the thousands of warriors.’ It kind of gives me imagery of the U S army of a tagline. Like join the army, be a warrior because they had the same tagline itself. And so, I’m just not keen on that.” –Participant

“Loss of knowledge-keepers” was seen as stereotyping all elders as having special knowledge or indicating that some people are more important than others (i.e., a loss is a loss no matter who it is or what knowledge they carry or whether they die from COVID or a heart attack).

“I just feel like a lot of these things are loaded because I know a lot of elders within my own family and across the nation. I’ve traveled to lots of places and not every elder is a knowledge keeper and knowledge bearer of tribal ways, of languages and stories. And so, I think it perpetuates a stereotype and a myth that is not, it’s not true.” –Participant

Ideas for Messaging. The suggestion to replace “ancestor” with “relative” was raised multiple times in focus groups, and this seems to fall in line with a broader focus on community. Using “protect, protection, protecting, protector” could be a way to avoid concerns over “warrior.”

INSIGHT 4: Acknowledge, but don't lead with, anxiety and fear of the vaccine.

Hesitancy to get vaccinated is tied to mistrust of the government and a lack of reliable information about how the vaccine works and the rates of severe side effects. Keeping in line with our Indigenous Futures Survey, which found that 96% of Native peoples do not trust the government, people who are hesitant to get vaccinated cited a history of the government and the medical field having harmed Native peoples. Some participants did not have an accurate understanding of how the vaccine works ("it isn't logical to inject yourself with the virus to protect yourself from the virus"). Others heard horror stories about people dying immediately after receiving the vaccine.

"I think out of all those, the one I probably liked the most was it is completely reasonable to be nervous about the COVID-19 vaccine. Cause I feel like people who are questioning it are valid. People have valid reasons for not wanting to get the vaccine." –Participant

Ideas for Messaging. Ensure transparency in messaging about the anxiety and fears, and unknowns, about the vaccine. Using Native public health experts and doctors as messengers, finding opportunities to answer frequently asked questions, and showing resources that show more information about the vaccines will build trust with audiences.

INSIGHT 5: Highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to the virus.

One woman said she would like to get vaccinated but has asthma and is worried about side effects, so she'd rather continue wearing a mask and social distancing. Some people are waiting to see what long-term effects of the vaccine might arise. Many participants said they appreciated seeing language like "vaccines are only a part of the solution," that they are "one tool," and that people will still need to wear masks, wash their hands, and maintain distance from people they aren't familiar with.

"What jumped out at you at the very end of this is 'only part of the solution. Wear your mask, social distance, wash your hands.' I think that tool, it keeps the magic wand idea of like vaccines being the end of it in check." –Participant

"The vaccine is one tool, but we still got to continue the other precautions." –Participant

"Sometimes you can give too much information and it makes more questions. Whereas you give both direct information and (the audience) understands it, they can digest it and they can make decisions on it." –Participant

Ideas for Messaging. Creating clear and concise ancillary messaging about the development of the vaccine, how it works, and how immunity happens would be useful, but do not make this a focus of messaging. Reiterate that as people get vaccinated, there are still many other precautions we need to take in order to slow the spread of the virus.

MESSAGING RECOMMENDATIONS

We tested five distinct messages designed to encourage people to view the vaccine as an important step to protecting their communities and to speak to an array of mindsets that might be hesitant to get vaccinated.

The first message was designed to be a core message that could be appended with the remaining four messages. This core message was written based on research we reviewed that indicated it was important to acknowledge for communities of color that the reason they have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 is due to no fault of their own, but rather systemic failures in U.S. society. The reaction to this core message was clear; it did not resonate with participants and should not be used.

However, with a few exceptions that have been noted above, there was a strong positive response overall to the second series of messages:

- The COVID-19 vaccines can protect our people and our ways of life.
- Get a vaccine to safeguard our language keepers and our culture holders for future generations.
- Our elders are particularly vulnerable—we protect them by getting vaccinated.
- Protect our future—get vaccinated as soon as you’re able.

With this in mind, taking into consideration the responses to other messaging and the above insights, we have drafted a new core message.

Our people have met the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic with [strength and resilience]. We've shown the world the power of Indigenous values by finding many ways to take care of our relatives and protect our ways of life for future generations. The COVID-19 vaccines are another important tool to slow the spread of the virus and allow us [return to ways of life that are important]**.*

Do your part to protect our future—get vaccinated as soon as you’re able, and continue wearing a mask, thoroughly washing your hands, and practicing social distancing.

Options: There are two elements of the message that have the option of being flexible:

* The important thing to remember about this element of the message is that you lead with a positive sentiment. Strength and resilience are examples of adjectives that might work here- other options include “innovation and community care,” “resilience and innovation,” etc.

** There are many opportunities to highlight the activities audiences are most looking forward to when the immediate threat of COVID-19 is gone. Options here include “to return to ceremonies, powwows, and the arms of our loved ones” or “visit with our grandchildren (children, parents, etc).

For questions regarding these findings and messaging suggestions please contact: IllumiNative at Connect@IllumiNatives.org and Urban Indian Health Institute at info@uihi.org.