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Community leaders demand: End vaccine apartheid in Baltimore

written by Struggle-La Lucha Baltimore bureau
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On March 6, community leaders held a news conference announcing the formation of the Baltimore Saving Lives Campaign. They called for an end to vaccine apartheid in Baltimore, and for concrete remedies to the disparity in Maryland's COVID-19 vaccine rollout.

Participants included the Rev. Annie Chambers, Peoples Power Assembly and Douglas Homes advocate; Dr. "Doc" Marvin Cheatham, president, Matthew Henson Neighborhood Association (West Baltimore); Leon Purnell, director, Men's and Family Center (East Baltimore); Joyce Butler, Prisoners Solidarity Committee; and

Sharon Black, retired RN and Peoples Power Assembly.

The press conference took place on a blustery cold day in front of Dallas Court at Douglas Homes. Rev. Chambers explained: "In this small housing court, three people have died from COVID-19 and a fourth has developed serious COVID illness. I have also lost a family member to COVID."

"We are asking for a minute of silence for the lives lost to COVID-19," Sharon Black announced. "You can see that this is not an abstract question for us. We will not rest until every person who wants a vaccine gets one and we beat COVID in Baltimore."

"Give Baltimore the damn vaccine!" proclaimed Doc Cheatham. His organization has been actively engaged with neighborhood outreach since the pandemic began. Cheatham stressed that Coppin State University should become a site for vaccination. "It sits in the heart of West Baltimore, and it enables residents to easily access the vaccine."

Leon Purnell stated, "Our residents don't have internet access and the ability to navigate the complex systems, and they are being left behind." He exclaimed, "We already have the vans that can do work in the Eastside."

"Our prisoners must get the vaccine! They are our relatives and loved ones. We are continually getting reports that there is inadequate PPE and they are getting sick," stated Joyce Butler.

The Baltimore Saving Lives Campaign is seeking meetings with city officials, the Baltimore Health Department, the state government and National Guard representatives to discuss concrete steps.

Following is the group's statement and list of demands:



Rev. Annie Chambers of Peoples Power Assembly speaks in front of Dallas Court in Baltimore's Douglas Homes. Three people in this small area have died from COVID-19 and another was seriously ill. SLL photo: Rasika Ruwanpathirana

Statement from the Baltimore Saving Lives Campaign

Ending vaccine apartheid

As community leaders and organizations, we have come together to form a Baltimore Saving Lives Campaign. We both seek to expose and highlight the disparity in vaccine distribution and put forward solutions.

Black, Brown and poor communities of Baltimore have been left behind. The facts are there, and the urgency is real. In the last year, Black people's life expectancy has dropped a full 2.7 years due to COVID-19. This is the first time in U.S. history that we have seen such a sharp decline.

Those most in need have been pushed to the back of the line. This is due to the methods that have been used to roll out the vaccines. Complex, confusing and impossible internet sign-ups, phone lines that people cannot get through, and lack of transportation have created barriers.

Our most vulnerable elders, those without digital access and transportation, must get the vaccine. So must low-wage essential workers, those living in public housing and on the streets, and those who are being forgotten in the patchwork of confusing delivery systems.

Our goal is to see that everyone who wants a vaccine gets a vaccine. Our goal is to beat COVID in Baltimore.

Our proposals are based on that larger goal. We must be proactive and think beyond the initial rollout, which has been a failure — a failure that has obviously left out the people of Baltimore. We need to prepare now, not wait!

These are our initial proposals:

Include M&T Bank Stadium site for Baltimore residents first.

Allocate more vaccines to close the disparity.

One dedicated 24-hour city hotline to schedule vaccines, based on the 311 model and with adequate staffing.

Plan to extend hours for all vaccination sites.

Door-to-door vaccinations.

Accessible community vaccination centers

- Churches and closed recreation centers

- Coppin State University – West Baltimore
- Men’s and Family Center – East Baltimore

Housing projects

- The zip code priorities set at the Convention Center site have left off many housing projects, including Douglas Homes. With the detection of the virus at Latrobe Homes, setting up mobile units to cover each area is urgent.

Free Uber transportation

- Baltimore County is already providing free Uber transportation.

Expand categories based on need

- The City of Baltimore can use its own guidelines based on the fact that many of our residents are at greater risk. For instance, the COVID death rate for Black, Latinx, and low-wage and essential workers is higher, regardless of age. In Washington, D.C., Mayor Muriel Browser lowered the age for vaccinations in heavily Black wards. This is because the Black population’s death rates were higher, and life expectancy was shorter. We must think out of the box, including exploring other vaccine sources if needed.

Homeless people and people with addictions

- Plans must be made to immediately go into action when one-shot vaccines are delivered. Many states have already begun using the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

Prisoners

- While the prison system is run primarily by the state government, many of the incarcerated population are from Baltimore City. We must strongly

advocate that all prisoners be vaccinated and have adequate PPE.

Low-wage and essential workers not formerly covered

- Many of these workers suffer from underlying health conditions, yet they are forced to work with no protection. This includes grocery workers, retail clerks, fast food and restaurant workers, bus drivers, etc. Let's get them vaccinated as soon as possible.
- Involve the unions in making plans to protect their workers.

Listen to our teachers: No return to classrooms until it's safe.

Weekly briefings with community leaders on progress and problems

- We are urging weekly briefings for the Saving Lives Campaign and others with city and state representatives, including the Baltimore City Health Department, representatives of the mayor's office, the governor and the National Guard.

We are developing a volunteer network of students, doctors, nurses, nursing assistants, EMTs and firefighters willing to roll up their sleeves and get the work done now. Please text us at (410) 218-4835 to get involved.

