



CASE STUDY

St. John's Well Child and Family Center: ADOLESCENT COVID-19 VACCINATION PROGRAM IN PARTNERSHIP WITH SCHOOL

St. John's Well Child and Family Center is a federally qualified health center (FQHC) serving patients of all ages at 20 locations in Central/ South Los Angeles and Compton, California. St. John's Well Child & Family Center started as a one-room, volunteer pediatric clinic in 1964, and is currently one of the largest non-profit healthcare providers in Los Angeles County. They operate school-based health centers (SBHCs) in four high schools and one elementary school. St. John's primary care clinical sites provide medical, dental, and behavioral health services and support services that engage the social determinants of health. They have developed strong partnerships with agencies working in health, education, social services, child welfare, legal assistance, reentry/anti-recidivism, and community/economic development. The School-Based Health Alliance (SBHA) interviewed St. John's Chief Development Officer and Executive Assistant about their adolescent COVID-19 vaccination program.

St. John's opened their first SBHC in 2009 in Lincoln High School and today has well-established relationships with five area schools. Their strong bond with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) was instrumental in their success as a testing and vaccination center for students and the community.

Working with Schools

As COVID-19 began to spread across the nation in early 2020, St. John's convened an internal COVID Task Force to plan and manage testing, secure personal protective equipment (PPE), and triage and treat infected patients. They developed a contact tracing program and tested 75,000 South Los Angeles



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residents. In addition, they utilized their existing mobile clinics to provide testing for churches, community-based organizations, schools, and the large homeless population in the area.

From September 2020 through April 2021, schools primarily operated through a remote learning model. SBHCs remained operational by immediately pivoting from in-person visits to clinical telehealth visits. However, SBHCs remained open with in-person care for families that lacked access to or experienced challenges with technology. Throughout 2020, SBHCs remained busy testing centers for high school students and community members. The testing sites were open from 8:00 am to 9:00 pm five days per week to accommodate the community. St. John's staff engaged their patient population to inform them of testing available at the high schools via SMS, texting, and

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phone calls for communication. In 2021, as vaccines became available, St. John's staff utilized these same communication tools to notify their patients in the various tiers of availability. In preparation for the administration of COVID-19 vaccinations, LAUSD initiated contact with the executive leadership of St. John's and invited them to enlarge their presence on the four school campuses that already had SBHCs. The school district believed SBHCs could serve as a significant source of vaccinations for students and their families. St. John's facilities and operations team met with LAUSD leaders to envision mega-clinic sites to vaccinate large numbers of students and community members, address security issues, and reduce risks. LAUSD generously provided tents, seating, and campus security based on the previously developed mobile vaccine clinic floor plan. A solid partnership was in place for vaccination clinics that became operational within three days of the meeting.

St. John's presence and footprint in the school through SBHCs played a significant role in their ability to align with the school district's goal of vaccinating a large number of students. For example, at one high school that housed an SBHC, the warm handoff from the executive leadership of LAUSD facilitated the relationship between St. John's and the new principal. In fact, in April 2021, when St. John's prioritized vaccinating students, the school principal and the CEO of St. John's held a press conference to deliver the unified message of assisting and supporting the community.

Innovations, Promotion, and Promising Practices

As vaccines became available to youth aged 12 and older, the four school campuses that housed SBHCs became a point of distribution. Each of the four SBHCs is in a Title I school (typically low-income). Bringing the vaccination points of distribution to the school campus increased access to care for students and their families. The vaccination sites were open from 8:00 am to 9:00 pm five days per week to ensure appointment availability to everyone that wished to be vaccinated. St. John's developed an outreach program and utilized its staff to distribute information on COVID-19 and the vaccine clinics in neighborhoods served by the SBHCs. They advertised through social media and local radio stations in English, Spanish, and Chinese. School principals distributed registration consent forms to families via links to the forms on the Los Angeles County Health Department website. Initially, students ages 16 and older completed St. John's consent forms. When youth aged 12 and older became eligible for vaccination, families completed two forms: one for St. John's and one for the County. St. John's staff operated the vaccination sessions during the school day and evening in the school auditorium from late April through mid-August 2021.

The Chief Development Officer turned to the organizer of their annual gala fundraising event for assistance with catering at the points of distribution. This individual assisted with supplying food for the staff and procured coffee and snacks to increase their comfort during the difficult initial days. The school district offered free parking to St. John's staff and provided monitors to conduct daily staff temperature checks. These details contributed to a welcoming atmosphere and complemented the clinical services offered by St. John's.



As a result of the partnerships forged by St. John's over the years, there was an enormous outpouring of support from corporations and individuals in the form of incentives. A partial list of incentives included:

- Cartons of candy
- Backpacks, teddy bears, blankets, and art supplies for students
- Gift cards for the first 25 students, ages 16 and older, who were vaccinated each day
- \$25 gift cards for the first 100 students, ages 12 through 16, vaccinated
- Weekly sweepstakes offered prizes that included tickets to concerts and 720 tickets to amusement park
- Food from local restaurants for the clinic staff and volunteers
- Food cooked by vaccinated community members for the staff and volunteers

The St. Johns team deployed a variety of promotion strategies to ensure that the maximum number of students received the vaccinations. Some of these strategies included:

- The promotion of vaccination clinics through news coverage on local TV channels, Telemundo, and NBC
- Photo opportunities for social media during students' 15 minutes of monitoring time post-vaccine. Once students began to post their photos on Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram, students from other parts of Los Angeles came to the school to receive COVID-19 vaccinations

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- Music continuously played at vaccination sites via speakers brought in by St. John's facility staff. Students loved having the music and made requests for specific songs.

Enabling Services

St. John's Chief Development Officer emphasized the critical importance of partnerships in creating their successful program. St. John's was not alone in their efforts. Via a \$1 million grant from Google, a program called Stop the Spread conducted outreach and education to help individuals access the vaccine. St. John's partnered with Stop the Spread and received funding to hire benefits counselors who spoke with families during the post-vaccination observation period. The counselors determined if the family had medical insurance or needed help applying for benefits. In addition, Stop the Spread provided iPads to help enroll families in insurance while on site. They also provided grocery gift cards, transportation assistance through Uber, housing assistance, and paid electric and gas bills for families in need, all through grant funds. Stop the Spread also utilized funds to find shelter for the many homeless youth and adults in this particular area of Los Angeles. This partnership allowed St. John's to focus on providing health care, while Stop the Spread focused on utilizing its expertise in enabling services to assist individuals and families.

Challenges

St. John's faced several daunting challenges throughout the pandemic, impacting both the school-based health center sites and their primary care and mobile clinic sites. The first challenge was misinformation about COVID-19 and later about the vaccine. In response, St. John's staff canvassed the South Los Angeles neighborhoods to knock on doors and provide accurate information to community members. They were thoughtful in how they imparted accurate information, listened to people's fears and concerns, and remained respectful of each person's opinion. Staff offered printed information from trusted sources and let individuals decide if they wanted to be vaccinated.

A second challenge was staffing their 26 distribution sites. To provide COVID testing from 8:00 am to 9:00 pm, St. John's hired 230 new staff within three months, a difficult feat with health care workers concerned for their safety and the safety of their loved ones. St. John's partnered with staffing agencies to provide temporary workers and found it very challenging to manage many temporary workers. Eventually, St. John's hired 350 permanent staff to help with this enormous task. The situation quickly changed once vaccines became available as clinical operations rapidly pivoted from testing to vaccinating.

During the summer school session of 2021, St. John's continued clinical operations in their vaccination centers in the school auditoriums. Once school began full-time in mid-August, St. John's moved operations from the auditoriums to new locations on the campuses. The SBHCs are in separate, portable buildings behind the schools, and the vaccination centers operated in mobile tents adjacent to the SBHCs. St. John's flexibility and persistence to vaccinate as many young people as possible has resulted in the vaccination of 41,596 youth, aged 12 through 18, in all of their points of distribution; the SBHC sites specifically vaccinated 29,353 young people (as of November 2021).

St. John's staff emphasized the critical importance of partnerships when assuming a project of this magnitude.

They worked closely with the state health department, the county health department, the Governor's office, and the school district. Their efforts through SBHCs were so successful that LAUSD asked them to be present in all district schools, not just those with SBHCs. The staff members are still learning to solidify those essential partnerships.

St. John's staff underscored that as an FQHC, you become part of the fabric of the community, and the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated their integration into the community. Their outreach, education, and presence in the schools and community increased awareness of their services in many neighborhoods. As a result, many more people acquired health care and an array of other services through St. John's multiple sites.

Future Plans

St. John's internal COVID Task Force continues to meet daily. They are currently addressing the vaccination of children ages 5 through 11. The plan is to continue utilizing the 26 points of distribution as vaccination sites; the staff will reach out to the parents/guardians of all their pediatric patients in the appropriate age group to explain the process and answer their questions and concerns. They will inform families that the children qualify by age, there is no need to make an appointment, and St. John staff will register the child for the vaccination. A press conference will launch the campaign in partnership with the Compton Unified School District.

With a grant from the Bureau of Primary Health Care, St. John's staff are engaged in outreach to unvaccinated youth and adults to understand their fears, misinformation, and reluctance to be vaccinated. They are producing roadshows with ten other agencies to outreach into black/brown and indigenous communities to invite folks that are reluctant to be vaccinated into community conversations. The roadshows create a platform to learn why people are hesitant to be vaccinated and a place for panels of experts to dialogue with community members.

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