




# ***Empowering Youth Vaccine Ambassadors to Promote COVID-19 Vaccination in Local Communities: A 7-Step Approach***

Princilla A. Minkah, BA<sup>1</sup>   
Amy Borg, MPH, MEd<sup>1</sup>  
Grace W. Ryan, PhD, MPH<sup>1</sup>   
Melissa Goulding, MS<sup>1</sup>  
Domenica Perrone, MBA, MA<sup>2</sup>  
Matilde Castiel, MD<sup>2</sup>  
Milagros C. Rosal, PhD, MS<sup>1</sup>  
Stephenie C. Lemon, PhD, MS<sup>1</sup> 

Despite the availability of COVID-19 vaccines for youth since 2021, vaccine hesitancy has resulted in suboptimal uptake. Public health campaigns that empower local youth ambassadors as trusted messengers who share their personal narratives related to getting vaccinated hold promise for promoting COVID-19 vaccination. We used a seven-step approach to develop, implement, and evaluate a youth-led ambassador campaign to promote COVID-19 vaccine uptake in communities experiencing COVID-19 disparities in Worcester, MA. The seven steps included (1) engaging with key partners; (2) determining a community of focus; (3) identifying trusted sources; (4) determining campaign components; (5) training the vaccine ambassadors; (6) disseminating the campaign; and (7) evaluating the campaign. We trained nine youth as vaccine ambassadors. Ambassadors were guided through self-reflection of motivations for COVID-19 vaccination and the resulting personal narratives became the campaign messaging. English/Spanish vaccine messages developed by youth ambassadors were disseminated through social media platforms (n = 3), radio (n = 2), local TV (n = 2), flyers (n = 2,086), posters (n = 386), billboards (n = 10), and local bus ads (n = 40). Qualitative youth feedback indicate participation in the

campaign was a positive and empowering experience which reinforces the importance of engaging youth in

<sup>1</sup>University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School, Worcester, MA, USA  
<sup>2</sup>City of Worcester, Worcester, MA, USA

**Authors' Note:** This work is a product of a Prevention Research Center and was supported by the Vaccine Confidence Network as part of a cooperative agreement (number #6U48DP006381-03-01) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. G.R. is funded by #T32CA172009 from the National Cancer Institute. M.G. is funded by the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences #TL1TR001454 and the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute #F31HL164126. The contents of this research are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the CDC or NIH. The authors would like to acknowledge and thank the nine youth ambassadors and community members who were involved in the youth ambassador campaign, including those from the following organizations: Worcester Division of Youth Opportunities, Boys and Girls Club of Worcester, Girls Inc. of Worcester, Worcester Youth Center, YMCA of Central Massachusetts, YWCA of Central Massachusetts, Worcester Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH), and the Latino Education Institute of Worcester State University. We would also like to thank George Annan for photography and Fernando Ponce for videography. Address correspondence to Stephenie C. Lemon, Division of Preventive and Behavioral Medicine, Department of Population and Quantitative Health Sciences, University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School, 55 Lake Avenue North, Worcester, MA 01655, USA; e-mail: [stephenie.lemon@umassmed.edu](mailto:stephenie.lemon@umassmed.edu).

## **Health Promotion Practice**

Month XXXX Vol. XX, No. (X) 1–6

DOI: 10.1177/15248399231178542

Article reuse guidelines: [sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

© 2023 Society for Public Health Education

public health messaging. Youth empowerment through personal narratives (and storytelling) holds promise for future public health campaigns.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 vaccination; public health campaign; vaccine ambassadors; youth empowerment; health disparities; community engagement

Vaccine hesitancy is a long-standing public health issue that has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic (Troiano & Nardi, 2021). Despite the availability of COVID-19 vaccines for youth since 2021, uptake remains low, particularly among Latinx and African American youth (Wiley et al., 2022). Addressing vaccine hesitancy remains critical to prevent unnecessary morbidity and mortality from COVID-19 infection.

Previous research on evidence-based strategies for communication of challenging health issues and vaccine hesitancy provides a scientific basis to inform COVID-19 focused public health strategies. Public health media campaigns can be used to inform, persuade, or motivate populations by conveying health messages to large sections of the population (Wakefield et al., 2010). Public health campaigns can be particularly successful when they use ambassadors as trusted messengers who represent community voices and faces to deliver messaging. Public health ambassadors are lay health workers who use natural social and media ties to reach populations that can be harder to access with traditional methods because of language, cultural, or other barriers (Hodgins et al., 2016). Public health ambassadors are particularly impactful when the ambassadors share personal stories related to the topic of interest, as these narrative forms of communication are particularly persuasive and can affect social norms and elicit behavior change (Agency for Health care Research and Quality [AHRQ], 2012). Youth represent a promising group for the application of the public health ambassador approach. By empowering youth to reflect, identify, and take action on what is meaningful to them related to public health issues, youth can create social change within their communities (Wang, 2020).

The purpose of this manuscript is to describe a seven-step process for developing a public health ambassador campaign centered around youth voices and to illustrate this process based on the experience of the



FIGURE 1 Seven-Step Model for Creating a Public Health Ambassador Campaign

Worcester, MA Youth COVID-19 Vaccine Ambassador campaign.

## ► COMMUNITY CONTEXT

A Youth Vaccine Ambassador campaign was conducted in Worcester, MA in 2021. Worcester, the second largest city in New England, is a diverse city where approximately half of the population are members of a racial or ethnic minority group, 20% of the population are born outside of the United States, and 20% of the population are living below the poverty line (City of Worcester, 2022). A partnership between the Prevention Research Center (PRC) at UMass Chan Medical School, the City of Worcester Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and local youth-serving agencies was established to promote COVID-19 vaccine confidence and uptake among local youth and families.

## ► SEVEN-STEP APPROACH

Figure 1 outlines our seven-step approach to developing, implementing, and evaluating a youth-centered public health ambassador campaign (Figure 1). Below, we describe the objective of each step of the campaign, list potential tasks related to accomplishing the objective and provide an implementation example based on engaging youth in Worcester, Massachusetts to be COVID-19 Vaccine Ambassadors.

### **Step 1: Engage Key Partners**

*Objective.* Identify and establish partnerships with key stakeholders who have shared interest in promoting the public health topic of focus.

*Tasks.* Initiate partnerships with local community organizations and establish a foundation for the partnership such as purpose, roles, ongoing communication, and methods for sharing information.

*Implementation Example.* In May 2021, shortly after approval of COVID-19 vaccines for adolescents (ages 12–17 years), the PRC conducted an environmental scan of partners that were promoting confidence and uptake of the COVID-19 vaccine. The Worcester HHS led a vaccine equity initiative to vaccinate communities with high rates of COVID-19 through mobile vaccine equity clinics and a homebound vaccination program. The PRC and HHS initiated a partnership with the mutual goal of expanding vaccination efforts.

### **Step 2: Determine Community of Focus**

*Objective.* Determine who the campaign will try to reach (community of focus) through a data-driven approach with key partners. Invite new partners to the table and seek to fully understand the community of focus.

*Tasks.* Learn more about the community of focus by exploring strengths, opportunities, and gaps in current efforts. Review public health surveillance data about the community of focus and invite representatives from the community and/or their trusted organization to join the partnership team. Use existing guides, such as those published by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and other data-driven approaches to understand strengths and opportunities related to the public health concern being addressed, through methods such as focus groups, interviews, or surveys.

*Implementation Example.* Our partnership determined a gap in outreach and messaging to promote COVID-19 vaccines for youth and families. Several youth-serving agencies were approached and agreed to collaborate. We used the CDC's guide, "COVID-19 Vaccine Confidence Rapid Community Assessment Guide" to learn more about this population (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). In seeking to understand our community of focus, partners gathered information from surveillance data, and we held focus groups with parents

(Goulding et al., 2022). The focus groups and interviews helped identify strengths, opportunities, and gaps which guided the focus of the campaign. Guiding themes were parents' concerns about side effects, concerns about the speed of vaccine development, and their want to know about others' vaccine decisions and experiences. These groups also revealed a need to better inform parents that the vaccines are free, are administered by medical professionals, and are available at the equity clinics without an appointment.

### **Step 3: Identify Trusted Sources**

*Objective.* Identify who the population of focus trusts, including individuals who could be public health ambassadors, agencies, news sources, social media, providers, and locations.

*Tasks.* With key partners, discuss and identify ambassadors, trusted agencies, and information sources by asking specific questions to learn about which locations and individuals are most trusted by the community of focus. In addition, define credible media sources and other potential dissemination channels specific to the community.

*Implementation Example.* After deciding on youth and families as our population of focus and engaging youth-serving community partners, we worked with our partnership team to identify potential Youth Vaccine Ambassadors. One of the partnering local youth-serving agencies identified nine older youth who grew up in the Worcester Public Schools, were active in school or sports, and were excited to serve as Youth Vaccine Ambassadors.

### **Step 4: Determine Campaign Components**

*Objective.* Determine the approach(es) the ambassadors will use to reach the community of focus and the materials and products that will be created for the campaign.

*Tasks.* Determine the campaign delivery channels and create an identifiable campaign "look" with basic graphic design, name, logo, and pictures. Create a messaging approach and any other information that will support the campaign.

*Implementation Example.* The team created a public health media approach featuring Youth Ambassadors sharing their own COVID-19 vaccine story. A local professional photographer took pictures of the youth in their own neighborhoods engaging in their favorite

activities, and a videographer created a coordinating public service announcement video. For example, a youth known for his local basketball games was featured with a basketball, an artist was shown painting. The youth decided which products (flyers, posters billboards, bus signs, TV and radio PSAs) they wanted. Products were personalized with each ambassador's picture and reason for vaccination and included the location and schedule of a reliable vaccine clinic. The youth decided on the campaign name #PostVaxLife, and a local artist designed the logo and branding used in the campaign.

### **Step 5: Train Vaccine Ambassadors**

*Objective.* Prepare the ambassadors to develop campaign messages and to answer questions and share resources about the public health topic of focus.

*Tasks.* Engage ambassadors in conversations regarding motivations and/or hesitations, personal experiences, and how to use these narratives to share information and talk to community members. Stories should be positive and clearly written in the storyteller's own words, reflective of true experience, short, and include a call to action. Prepare ambassadors with facts to answer questions. Make a plan to provide ongoing support to the ambassadors.

*Implementation Example.* We trained youth to succinctly develop personal narratives featuring their own reasons for getting vaccinated against COVID-19. The ambassadors met with Commissioner of HHS to learn about the vaccines and review written materials about vaccine safety and effectiveness that could also be shared with community members.

### **Step 6: Disseminate the Campaign**

*Objective.* Disseminate campaign materials through various channels to members of the community of focus.

*Tasks.* Tailor templates of the campaign products for each ambassador and create personalized materials for each ambassador. Decide what platform will be used to track outreach and dissemination. Establish contracts or other arrangements to disseminate the campaign.

*Implementation Example.* Ambassador narratives sharing their personal reasons for getting vaccinated were shared and disseminated through social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook), media outlets

(local radio and television stations), flyers ( $n = 2,086$ ) and posters ( $n = 386$ ) distributed to local organizations, billboards in high traffic areas ( $n = 10$ ), and local bus ads ( $n = 40$ ). Figure 2 is an example poster template from the #PostVaxLife campaign that highlights one of the nine youth ambassadors (Figure 2). Youth ambassadors also used campaign products to promote vaccines at several youth-serving agencies, schools, and community events. Products were written in the ambassador's first language (English or Spanish) and dissemination was targeted to the local neighborhoods of each ambassador. Community leaders and members were invited to request posters/fliers via networking groups such as local community agencies.

### **Step 7: Evaluate the Campaign**

*Objective.* Determine the effectiveness of the campaign to understand what worked well, what could be improved, and if the population of focus was reached.

*Tasks.* Determine how to track the dissemination of materials, collect feedback from ambassadors, and gather data from the community of focus, if appropriate. Evaluation can be conducted through many methods, such as interviews, focus groups, surveys, participation records, and assessment of public health data.

*Implementation Example.* We conducted a mixed-methods evaluation. Dissemination activities were systematically tracked using an online database (REDCap). We conducted qualitative interviews with the youth ambassadors to learn about their experiences. In addition, we administered a survey at the City's primary vaccine clinic for 6 months to understand how people learned of the clinic.

## **► LESSONS LEARNED**

We identified three key elements of our COVID-19 Youth Ambassador Campaign that helped to facilitate our implementation success. First, participating in the campaign was empowering.

In informal qualitative feedback from participating youth, we found that youth reported overall positive experiences in terms of personal development and ability to influence vaccine confidence. For example, one ambassador shared, "My experience has been positive and I'm really glad that I was a part of this campaign! I enjoyed the active participation," and another reported



**"I got the vaccine because my mom and little brother suffer from auto-immune diseases. I wanted to keep me and my family healthy, so far we have been. #PostVaxLife"**

— Morgan Johnson, Age 20  
 Worcester Youth Vaccine Ambassador  
 South High Community School C/O 2018  
 Favorite Neighborhood: Betty Price Playground



 @PostVaxLife



### Questions about the vaccine or vaccine clinics?

Call the Worcester Department of Health and Human Services Mobile Clinic at 508-868-6438. Or visit <http://www.worcesterma.gov/coronavirus/vaccination> for more information about vaccines in Worcester.

### FREE COVID-19 Vaccines in Worcester Available at these Walk-In Clinics:

**ALL vaccines administered by medical professionals!**

- Aids Project Worcester, 165 Southbridge Street: Fridays from 1 – 4 PM
- Edward M. Kennedy Community Health Center, 19 Tacoma Street: Mondays - Fridays, 8 AM - 1 PM
- UMMHC Mercantile Center, Front Street: Mondays, 11 AM - 4 PM; Tuesdays, 10 AM - 3 PM; Thursdays, 10 AM - 3 PM
- Worcester Public Library's Main Branch, 3 Salem Square: Wednesdays, 11 AM - 7 PM; Saturdays, 11 AM - 5 PM

FIGURE 2 Example Poster From the Worcester, MA #PostVaxLife COVID-19 Youth Vaccine Ambassador campaign

“At the first vaccine event, no one was getting up to get vaccinated. I shared my personal vaccine story and why I got vaccinated in front of everyone and in that moment at least six people got up to get vaccinated. That was empowering.”

Second, collaborating with multiple local community organizations who aided with recruitment of ambassadors and shared campaign resources through their networks and social media platforms greatly broadened the reach of the campaign. Third, local ambassadors known in the community were the highlight of this campaign approach. They played an important role in the community as reliable and trusted sources of information. Training ambassadors to develop and share their personal reasons for getting vaccinated is also a feasible, effective messaging approach.

## ► CONCLUSIONS

We have presented a seven-step model and an accompanying example of how we used a youth empowerment informed approach to create a public health campaign for COVID-19 vaccinations. The seven-step model, which uses personal narratives as the key communication strategy, can be used to guide public health campaigns grounded in local context and community engagement to address emergent and important public health issues in communities, beyond COVID-19 vaccination.

### ORCID iDs

Princilla A. Minkah  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0820-5126>

Grace W. Ryan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0354-2644>

Stephenie C. Lemon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3321-6070>

## REFERENCES

- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. (2012). *Communication and dissemination strategies to facilitate the use of health-related evidence*. <https://effectivehealthcare.ahrq.gov/products/medical-evidence-communication/research-protocol>
- City of Worcester. (2022). *U.S. Census Bureau Quickfacts*. U. S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/worcestercity-massachusetts>
- Goulding, M., Ryan, G. W., Minkah, P., Borg, A., Gonzalez, M., Medina, N., Suprenant, P., Rosal, M. C., & Lemon, S. C. (2022). Parental perceptions of the COVID-19 vaccine for 5- to 11-year-old children: Focus group findings from Worcester Massachusetts. *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics*, 18(6), 2120721. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21645515.2022.2120721>
- Hodgins, F., Gnich, W., Ross, A. J., Sherriff, A., & Worlledge-Andrew, H. (2016). How lay health workers tailor in effective health behaviour change interventions: A protocol for a systematic review. *Systematic Reviews*, 5(1), 102.
- Troiano, G., & Nardi, A. (2021). Vaccine hesitancy in the era of COVID-19. *Public Health*, 194, 245–251. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2021.02.025>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). *COVID-19 Vaccine Confidence Rapid Community Assessment Guide: A guide to help you understand your community's needs regarding COVID-19 vaccines in three weeks*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/vaccinate-with-confidence/rca-guide/downloads/CDC-RCA-Guide-2021-508.pdf>
- Wakefield, M. A., Loken, B., & Hornik, R. C. (2010). Use of mass media campaigns to change health behaviour. *The Lancet*, 376(9748), 1261–1271. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(10\)60809-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(10)60809-4)
- Wang, M. L. (2020). *Preventing childhood obesity through youth empowerment: A cluster RCT of the H2GO! Program* (5R01DK120713) [Grant]. <https://grantome.com/grant/NIH/R01-DK120713-02>
- Wiley, Z., Khalil, L., Lewis, K., Lee, M., Leary, M., Cantos, V. D., Ofotokun, I., Roupheal, N., & Rebolledo, P. A. (2022). A Framework for inspiring COVID-19 vaccine confidence in African American and Latino communities. *Vaccines*, 10(8), 1319. <https://doi.org/10.3390/vaccines10081319>