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Fresh cuts and COVID shots: Barbershop bridges vaccine divide

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“I signed you up to get the vaccine,” Katrina Randolph, 52, told him. She owns Tré Shadez hair studio in Capitol Heights, Maryland, where Alson sweeps hair.

As a certified community health care worker, Randolph had been trying to persuade her friend of 40 years to get his COVID-19 shot. But unnerving stories Alson, 57, heard from friends and family kept him from making his own appointment.

So Randolph took matters into her own hands when she heard The Shop Spa in nearby Hyattsville was offering free COVID-19 vaccines through the University of Maryland’s Health Advocates In-Reach and Research (HAIR). Alson agreed to go after Randolph, whose salon is part of the initiative, promised to go with him.

“If they went up with them like Katrina did out here, I think everybody would come out here and get a shot like that,” Alson said. “She reads up on everything. She would never steer me wrong.”

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For about two decades, The Shop Spa has been a mainstay in the community where Black, Hispanic and Latino people make up about two-thirds of residents, according to U.S. Census estimates. It’s part of a network of 10 Black hair salons and barbershops in Prince George’s County that public health practitioners and researchers have transformed into health and wellness intervention hubs aiming to fight health disparities.

As vaccination rates in communities of color hit hard by COVID-19 lag in many states, the network is combating vaccine hesitancy by leveraging the trust Black communities have in the salons by offering shots right at the shops.



Sabrina Fraley of Washington, D.C., receives her first COVID-19 vaccination at The Shop Spa barbershop and salon in Hyattsville, Maryland on May 17.

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“This is Mom-and-Pop, Mr. Smith on the corner, been there 20 years kind of thing,” said Stephen Thomas, who directs the program and the University of Maryland’s Center for Health Equity. “They might not have Ph.Ds behind their name or MDs behind their name, but they have tremendous influence, tremendous trust and trustworthiness.”

During Monday afternoon's event, clients flowed in and out of the barbershop. Staff welcomed people at the shop's entrance, marked by colorful balloons, then escorted them to one of the black leather chairs where they usually sit once or twice a week to get a fresh cut.

Health care workers registered them with iPads, then sent them to the back of the shop to get vaccinated. After receiving the vaccine, clients were led to an outdoor observation area where they sat socially distanced in chairs for 15 minutes in case of a reaction.



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Not 'tethered to a hospital'

It's not the first time HAIR has addressed vaccination rates in Black communities.

Thomas, a scholar on the long-term effects of the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study and Black participation in public health research, also conducted research in HAIR network's barbershops to understand factors behind lower flu immunization rates in Black adults and communication strategies to improve them.





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Then and now, barbers and stylists have told him they don't want to get "the jab" only to be left with health disparities, like heart disease and diabetes that shorten lives. "Then it's nothing more than more of the same," Thomas said. "You know what? They are right. It's time that we go into the community looking for solutions, looking for their wisdom."

That's why for the past decade his team has been collaborating with barbershops and hair salons to train barbers and stylists to become health advocates. Among several health education efforts, the stylists promote health surveys and screenings essential to detecting disparate outcomes in Black populations – from colorectal cancer to blood pressure screenings. The idea is “you don’t have to be tethered to a hospital” to reach good health, Thomas said.

Leading up to The Shop Spa’s event, Thomas and his team held Zoom town halls with barbers and stylists during which medical experts addressed concerns about the vaccine. As longtime stylists of their customers, the trusted messengers then passed on the information to their clients.



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Mike Brown, barber at The Shop Spa and a certified community health care worker

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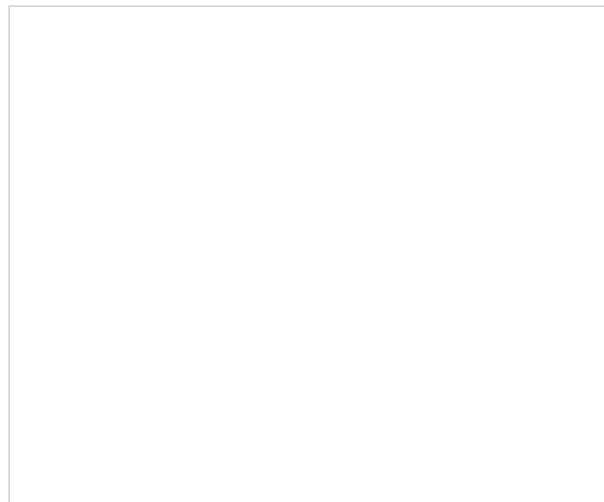
Mike Brown, 49, cuts hair at The Shop Spa and became certified as a community health care worker last month after years of listening to his longtime clients talk about their health concerns while in the chair.

"They come to us and talk about stuff going on in the marriage, health issues. ... They have a trust with us. And I took a position to give them the correct information," he said.

Brown grew up in the neighborhood and went to high school in the area.

"I'm definitely passionate about giving information to the community," Brown said. "To be giving back to the community where I'm from means everything to me."

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appointments.

Lus Castillo, 20, was the only person left in her family who hadn't received the vaccine. She often stays late at the restaurant where she works, and last-minute shifts kept her from making an appointment.

The vaccine "brings more hope that all this will end, and we can return back to normal," she said.

Similarly, Omar Viera, 52, wasn't able to take time off to get a COVID-19 shot. The mechanic has been working overtime to make up for taking time off to recuperate after being hospitalized with the coronavirus last year.



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Sisay Endale had wanted to get his shot as soon as the vaccines became available. But English is his second

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Sisay Endale, 44, had wanted to get his shot as soon as the vaccines became available. But English is his second language, and he had trouble understanding how to find and make an appointment.

That's why he said it was fate that two staff members from The Shop Spa walked into the car wash next door where he was working Monday afternoon and asked if he'd like to get vaccinated. He dropped what he was doing and followed them to the barbershop to finally get his shot.

"I'm lucky to be here," he said. "I'm happy."

Before offering vaccines at the Hyattsville anchor shop, HAIR provided personal protective equipment to barbershop workers and weekly saliva COVID-19 tests throughout the pandemic, Thomas said.

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Now, he wants to offer the vaccine at the other salons in the 10-shop network.

"We're at the last mile. These are the groups of people that are not showing up at a mass (vaccination) clinic, they may not have a medical home and they're just – not resistant – but they need a nudge," Thomas said. "It's getting better, but it's still not there yet."

"You just have to treat people with respect, treat them with dignity, and recognize their humanity."

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