
How Canada's non-profits are supporting the vaccination rollout

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As troubling reports surfaced last year outlining the disproportionately high positivity rates of COVID-19 in racialized communities, Toronto-based resident doctor Vivek Govardhanam and some of his colleagues noticed a concerning trend: the information broadcast by public health units and governments wasn't always reaching the most vulnerable people.

He was thinking specifically of first-generation Canadians and newcomers who work essential and front-line jobs, speak languages other than English, aren't on youth-oriented apps like Instagram or TikTok, and still get most of their news from outlets back home – places like India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Iran. Newcomer communities in Calgary, Montreal, and Surrey, BC, were experiencing similar problems.

"A group of us got together and realized our parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles belong to that category," says Govardhanam. "If they're not subscribing to mainstream media, then they're not getting the information. That's the bottom line: it doesn't matter how many millions of dollars a government spends on advertisements if people aren't going to see it."

To help fill that gap, Govardhanam – along with Sabina Vohra-Miller, the founder of the website Unambiguous Science; Priya Shah, a family doctor at Humber River Hospital; and Seema Marwaha, a doctor and assistant professor at the University of Toronto – co-founded the South Asian Health Network, a volunteer-run organization focused on addressing the systemic barriers in healthcare impacting South Asian communities in the Greater Toronto Area. Right now, however, their attention is concentrated on vaccine myth-busting and hesitancy.

According to a recent survey by [Stats Canada](#), although three-quarters of Canadians said they

were willing to get the vaccine, the figures are much lower for some ethnocultural communities (e.g., 56.6% of Black respondents, 68% of Arab, 67.8% of Métis, and 66% of Latin American respondents reported being somewhat to very willing to get the vaccine). These statistics are especially concerning to health experts and community advocates given that during the first wave of the pandemic, mortality rates were two times higher in neighbourhoods with higher proportions of racialized residents.

Vaccine hesitancy also varies across the country. In Montreal, local groups are reporting vaccine skepticism among Black residents, while in British Columbia, Indigenous leaders worry that misinformation is exacerbating vaccine hesitancy in First Nations communities.

Within the GTA's South Asian community, Govardhanam says, harmful myths have circulated on WhatsApp and in popular Facebook groups. These include rumours that the vaccines contain bovine and pig cells and that they cause infertility in women. To help dispel the misinformation, the South Asian Health Network has organized three webinars – in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Tamil – in which doctors answer submitted questions about the vaccines and has created culturally appropriate downloadable videos, infographics, and posters in numerous languages.

“We keep getting messages from people saying, ‘You know what, we were not going to take the vaccine. Thank you so much for coming to talk to us,’” Govardhanam says. “There were a lot of South Asian women who had all these apprehensions about vaccines because of the myths going around about how it affects fertility. We worked really hard to dispel that and made dedicated videos that are easily shareable on WhatsApp. We recently found out that these videos were even a big hit in India.”

The South Asian Health Network is just one of many Canadian volunteer groups and non-profits helping support vaccination efforts across the country. Large national organizations like the YMCA and the Royal Canadian Legion have offered up their spaces to serve as vaccination centres. BC-based non-profit MOSAIC is helping newcomers book appointments and is also organizing [vaccine information webinars](#) with Fraser Health. The Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) has held virtual webinars to share important information with refugees about how to get vaccinated. The group has also produced [COVID-19 resources](#) reviewed by doctors, sharing updates about the vaccination rollout in a dozen languages.

In early March, Alberta's first Indigenous, urban COVID-19 immunization clinic was launched in a safe, culturally appropriate environment, at Calgary's Circle of Wisdom Elders and Seniors Centre, which serves the city's Indigenous communities. Volunteers with the Friendly Neighbour Hotline, an initiative by the University Health Network's OpenLab, are doing door-to-door outreach in some Toronto Community Housing buildings to help seniors book shots.

Cathy Taylor, executive director of the Ontario Nonprofit Network, says non-profits can play a key role in assisting the vaccination rollout. As well-trusted institutions in the communities they serve, non-profits can help disseminate public health campaigns. “Municipal and provincial governments have this cadre of non-profits on the ground that can help them reach the most vulnerable people quicker and in a more trusted way than they could.”

In Toronto, the city partnered with TAIBU Community Health Centre, a non-profit serving Toronto Black communities and the neighbourhood of Malvern in Scarborough, to develop the

Black Scientists' Task Force on Vaccine Equity. Made up of more than a dozen Black doctors and healthcare leaders, the task force is currently developing public health recommendations to counter vaccine hesitancy and research the levels of vaccine acceptance. In the short-term, they've hosted virtual town halls that focus on the historical and contemporary issues that affect the perception of vaccines, how vaccines work, misinformation and conspiracy theories, and Black health resiliency.

Non-profits are also helping people overcome other obstacles that could prevent them from getting the vaccine, such as accessing the internet to book appointments. Libraries have started offering their services in several Ontario communities. In early March, library staff in Waterloo Region began calling adults over 80 to help them book vaccination appointments.

"Libraries have an intimate understanding of how access to technology can be a real barrier to service, which is why we reached out to see how we can support the vaccine rollout," said Mary Chevreau, CEO of Kitchener Public Library, [in a statement](#). "Since many residents already rely on library resources and assistance to navigate government documents, having our staff help with booking appointments is a natural fit."

In some communities, non-profits are providing space for vaccination campaigns. Steven Clark, the national executive director of the Royal Canadian Legion, contacted health authorities at the federal and provincial levels to offer up their Legion halls last fall.

"As an organization with hundreds of Legion branches all across the country, we felt there would be the opportunity [to help]. A lot of these branches have larger halls or meeting spaces that would lend themselves as a perfect location for vaccinations," Clark says. Legion halls in BC, Ontario, Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, and Newfoundland have hosted vaccination clinics. "Particularly important is [that] a number of our branches are in more rural locations where you may not have convention facilities or hotels with large rooms that can accommodate things like this."

Govardhanam of the South Asian Health Network also acknowledged the importance of non-profits in this spring's vaccination rollout. He encourages other groups to get involved in whatever way they can. "This is always my pitch: I say, 'If not me, then who? If not now, then when?' This is one of the few times where we can make a huge impact."