

# Stepping Up to Lead A Community Vaccination Campaign

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For over a decade, I have served as the NAEMT representative

to the Forum on Medical and Public Health Preparedness for Disasters and Emergencies, convened by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine. Long before COVID-19 arrived, pandemic planning conversations revolved around how to get vaccines out to the “last mile,” the most difficult to reach residents. Last mile individuals include the frail elderly or people with mobility problems who have difficulty getting out of the house, and people in outlying areas who don’t have transportation or a means to readily get to vaccine sites.

When the preparedness forum met in early 2020, it was clear that our pandemic planning discussions were no longer theoretical. The pandemic we had pondered was happening. It was here. Along with stocking up on PPE, training my staff on how to properly use it, and implementing robust infection control processes and quarantine procedures, I began thinking about how we were going to help the patients in our last mile.

As EMS practitioners, we know the diabetics in our area who can’t leave their house, the people without cars who call a cab to get to their doctor’s office, and those who have just enough to fill up their gas tank to come into town once a month to get groceries. As the fire chief of the Upper Pine River Fire Protection District, a super rural agency serving a population of 12,000 people spread over 272 square miles in Colorado, I knew reaching those patients would be challenging. I also believed it was our duty to try.

In September 2020, we started



offering COVID testing in our community. In keeping with our “we solve problems” motto, we also began putting a vaccination program in place – rehabbing a vaccine fridge that we had acquired at no charge from the public health department, and training EMT’s to administer vaccines under the guidance of our state and local medical directors.

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As soon as vaccines became available, our EMTs and paramedics shadowed staff at a local hospital administering the first vaccines to healthcare workers. As a paramedic and fire chief, I was there with my staff, putting shots in arms. On New Year’s Eve 2020, we had extra doses, so we offered them to first responders. We stayed late into the evening, waiting for the last people to show up to receive their vaccines so that none were wasted.

We officially began vaccinating our community on January 10, 2021. Since then, our staff of 30 has administered over 3,200 vaccines. Our EMTs and paramedics also stepped up to serve with Ambulance Strike Teams, assisting in Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) clinics around the country. Our personnel were sent to New Jersey and Memphis on 30-day assignments, administering vaccines 12 hours a day.

## Halting the Pandemic

Why did we do this? First, we recognized that the pandemic was a national emergency and our local health district, like other public health agencies around the country, had the expertise but not the horsepower to do all that was needed to respond.

Second, we knew we had the expertise and the personnel to help ensure that members of our community not only had access to emergency medical care when they were sick with COVID, but could access COVID-19 testing and vaccines.

In doing so, we could help prevent the spread of COVID throughout our community and ultimately, put an end to this devastating pandemic.

Because our agency got on board with vaccinations early, the state of Colorado contracted with us to assist other public health clinics in reaching underserved communities. We developed processes to deliver vaccines wherever they're needed. We've visited an Indian reservation, stood up a walk-in vaccine clinic at a pancake breakfast in a small rural town, and have shown up at businesses and vaccinated their entire staff.

We were fortunate that at the time vaccines became available, our agency's seasonal call volume was down, allowing on-duty staff to be able to conduct these operations. It was an all-hands-on deck effort, with everyone from our admin staff to our clinicians participating in learning new computer systems, monitoring the vaccine fridge and greeting people arriving for vaccines.

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### Takeaways

We learned a lot. We learned that our community has a large population of people over 70 who are shut-ins, or nearly so. As we get into wildfire season, we are working on ways to make sure we can evacuate these folks quickly if needed.

We learned the value as an EMS agency of participating in our local healthcare coalition. The relationships built with our health department and trust between our organizations was invaluable in facilitating our efforts.

We also learned that the public's trust in our agency was key in overcoming vaccine hesitancy. We've had a lot of long conversations with residents about the value of vaccines, how they work and what are the risks. I was encouraged when those conversations convinced even some of the skeptics to get vaccinated.

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Vaccinating our community also helped the mental health of our providers, who for months have been in protective clothing and providing care to those with

COVID-19. It was a morale booster to administer a vaccine to people who were grateful and left our vaccine clinics with a sense of relief and on occasion tears of joy. People in our community brought us cookies, lunch and their gratitude. It helped our providers refuel their tank, knowing they are potentially saving a life.

It's been six months since our agency started administering vaccines. As we start to shift our efforts into the seasonal increases in EMS calls and the wildfire season, our vaccine efforts are winding down. The state has vaccine buses circulating, and there are plenty of vaccines available. We see a light at the end of the tunnel.

When I look back at the efforts of my staff, along with that of so many EMS practitioners around the nation who stepped up to care for the sick, administer vaccines or provide medical standby at vaccine clinics, I feel proud that we were a part of helping our country overcome the pandemic. We succeeded in keeping our community as safe as we could. For years we have been saying that EMS is a force multiplier with a role in public health and injury and illness prevention. The pandemic gave us a chance to demonstrate this, and to show that we are ready and able to help protect the health of the community, however we are needed.