**New Year, New Hope for Rural America in the Fight Against COVID**

**By Alan Morgan and John M. Bridgeland**

A New Year rings in and the COVID pandemic is still with us. Pandemic fatigue is understandable at this point. But the loss of more than 824,000 Americans to date and the arrival of a new, more transmissible variant, should drive a renewed push to turn the tide.

We have the tools to do it. We know where our focus must be, but one area of great concern is rural America.

Rural communities are among the hardest hit as another wave of the pandemic rolls across America and Omicron renews COVID’s assault on the unvaccinated. Last fall, the incidence rates of COVID-19 in rural America were roughly 54 percent higher than elsewhere in the country, according to the Rural Policy Research Institute. To date, if you live in a rural community, you are more than twice as likely to die from COVID than those in nonrural areas.

Analysis from [The Daily Yonder](https://dailyyonder.com/new-rural-covid-19-infections-jump-nearly-50-deaths-also-climb/2021/12/09/) showed that incident rates climbed nearly 50 percent in rural counties in the two weeks following the Thanksgiving holiday, a worrisome trend with the rapid spread of the Omicron variant now.

The disparity requires an effort to reach families in these communities with trusted voices, sound science, and accurate information. Trusted rural voices have banded together with the National Rural Health Association (NRHA) and COVID Collaborative to address the disparity and look for opportunities to speak directly with rural Americans about the vaccines.

Together with organizations like the American Farm Bureau Federation, the Cooperative Extension System, and others, we are standing together to encourage Americans who may still be questioning vaccines to seek out the latest accurate information about getting vaccinated. This work takes many forms.

A national PSA campaign, co-sponsored by the Ad Council and COVID Collaborative, brings the real stories of seven families in rural America directly impacted by COVID, shining a light on their journeys from vaccine-hesitant to vaccinated. The PSAs drive viewers to an online resource hub - [getvaccineanswers.org](http://getvaccineanswers.org) - for straight talk and fact-based information on COVID vaccines.

A wide range of factors impacts individuals’ decisions to get educated and to get vaccinated. According to Ad Council research last year, large groups of rural Americans who remain undecided about vaccination continue to have concerns about long-term side effects of the vaccines (73.7%) and doubts about the efficacy of vaccination (69.6%) due to new breakthrough cases.

Families, faith, and the fabric and connections across local communities themselves will play a key role in this ongoing effort to overcome vaccine hesitancy.

The NRHA is also working alongside COVID Collaborative to disseminate [a communication toolkit](https://www.ruralhealth.us/programs/covid-19-pandemic/covid-19-vaccine-resources) to its network of members, partners, and providers. We want to equip rural employers, small business owners, and other trusted voices with conversation starters, data, and vaccine facts to improve access to vaccines and to help overcome the hesitancy in rural America.

A nationwide response must reach every part of the country, and we are eager to help engage more Americans to get answers to their good questions about vaccines.

Rural America is not a monolith. The diversity across rural America is as rich and expansive as our country itself. We can’t expect to move the needle with a single act or message. Combined efforts like the one NRHA and COVID Collaborative are proud to help lead aim to meet rural Americans where they are through their trusted healthcare and medical leaders, houses of worship, the agricultural community, and the small business community.

In times of crisis, Americans always rise to the challenge. We know this New Year will bring renewed efforts and progress in our work to help rural Americans overcome vaccine hesitancy and accelerate the day when all Americans can safely return to leading active and productive lives.

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