

Strategies for Staff Vaccination: Benton Franklin Head Start

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Dr. Bernadine Futrell: Well, hello everyone, and welcome to our newest series of the Head Start Forward campaign, Strategies for Staff Vaccination: Voices from the Field. I am Dr. Futrell, and I'm the proud director of the Office of Head Start. And I want to say thank you to the Head Start community for your leadership and your commitment as we continue to navigate out of the pandemic and move Head Start forward.

Today, I'm honored to introduce you to the Benton Franklin Head Start program in Richland, Washington. Let's listen in and welcome the wonderful team at Benton Franklin.

Kathy Parson: Our program is in eastern Washington state – Tri-Cities areas –and we serve Benton and Franklin counties. I love the staff. I love watching the kids bloom in our program – and they do – and I love watching our families grow. Since the start of the pandemic, our areas had a very high infection rate. And even with the availability of the vaccine, a low vaccination rate.

I think I was really naive because I thought when teachers could get their vaccine, I was so excited. You know, like I said earlier, it's like, “OK, we can do this. All the kids will come back, and we'll be back to what we always did.” And staff just weren't getting the vaccine.

Letty Perez: We used several methods to ensure our staff and families knew the latest COVID-19 vaccination and educational information.

Stephani Sommerville: Our program offered six Q&A Zoom sessions to staff, where we discussed our personal reasons for getting the vaccine and the reactions we had to it. We also showed staff how to sign up for a vaccination appointment. During one of the meetings, we livestreamed the manager receiving her vaccine.

Lauren Carlson: We also offer two education sessions for our staff. The education sessions were done by nurses at our local health department. They educated our staff on the history of vaccines, the history of vaccine hesitancy, safety of vaccines, and they also answered our staff's questions.

Kathy: We did a vaccine clinic here on site, and I'm vaccinated, but I was there. I went to it. I attended it. I just immersed myself in it, and I made myself present. I think that's probably a big part of it. We just stayed really humble about it.

Stephani: We didn't come from it so much as like, “We're managers, and we're telling you, you have to get this.” We're just people. We came about it with our heart, and like she said, we were raw. We shared a lot of personal stories. And I know like me personally, I lost my dad, and I lost my grandma to this pandemic. And my 17 year old son was really sick, and I thought I was

going to lose him too. And I was very hesitant to get the vaccine, but after going through that, I didn't want anyone else to lose a loved one or lose their own life. I think just sharing those stories really helped people connect.

Kathy: The state of Washington issued a COVID mandate that included Head Start program employees in mid-August of this year to be fully vaccinated by October 18th, 2021. At that time, only 60% of our staff were vaccinated. I'm happy to report that most staff were ready to receive the vaccine then, and we now have a staff vaccination rate between 90 and 92%. Of 114 staff, only one has quit because of the mandate. I believe this had so much to do with our providing ongoing information about the vaccine and always leading with our hearts.

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