

Strategies for Staff Vaccination: Voices from the Field — Knox County Head Start

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Dr. Bernadine Futrell: Hello, Head Start, and welcome back to our Head Start Forward miniseries around staff vaccination. I'm Dr. Futrell, the proud director of the Office of Head Start. And this week, I have the pleasure of introducing you to Knox County Head Start, that's located in central Ohio.

Margaret "Peg" Tazewell: Knox County Head Start is a single purpose agency serving Knox County, Ohio. We've been around in some form or fashion since 1965.

We've been back in our classrooms since Ohio opened up on June the 1st, 2020. And what that has meant for us is that we've been giving a lot of attention to health and safety with the return to the classroom. And that caused us to require vaccinations for all of our employees beginning last March, with a deadline that was originally May 1st, and we extended to June 1st.

We consulted with both our Board and Policy Council and members of our health services advisory committee, and both Julie and I were quite surprised by that unanimous decision from both the Policy Council and the Board to require the vaccine. And that really is a hallmark for us of kind of the independent governance that both our Policy Council and Board have, even though they work so closely in partnership with Knox County Head Start.

Julie Mickley: Really, one of the early challenges we faced when we put the mandate into place was that vaccines weren't available to all of us yet. They were aged banded when they did the rollout. We first started talking about this as a requirement, but we couldn't put a deadline on it because we didn't know when we'd be able to get vaccines for everybody. That's when I started having some conversations with Knox Public Health, and they were so fantastic.

Many of our employees just weren't eligible yet, so we started to say, "Hey, when you guys have a vaccine clinic, if you have any left that you've already opened and you need to use that day, let us know. And we'll start to keep a list of people who'd like to be vaccinated first." We worked with them. We created a list of everybody that was willing or interested in getting a vaccine. It wasn't long after that, they called me one afternoon and said, "Hey, we can vaccinate everybody on your list today if you can get them there." So, that's what we did. And it honestly was like Christmas morning here. People were so excited to get their vaccines. I believe we did, maybe, 30 employees that first day. And then after that we continued to work with Knox Public Health to just slip people in wherever we could before they became more widely available to them.

Our leadership and Peg and I really kind of took on this role of reading everything we could, taking every training we could, so that we knew as much as possible to share with our staff and just sharing reputable sources of information with our staff throughout. By the time the

vaccines became a reality, our staff were really primarily excited to get them and onboard. We were using things like Facebook Live to communicate regularly. And we started doing that when we first had the closures due to COVID, although we never really closed.

Peg: We really used our early adopters, I think, who are very excited to get the vaccine. Like Julie said, it was like Christmas morning. We took pictures. We shared them to our internal employee Facebook group. We invited conversation there. We responded there. We did make decisions about allowing employees to get vaccines on work time. To take leave time if they had a severe reaction. We kind of tried to time some of the clinics to be on Fridays so that if we were feeling unwell, we would have the weekend to recover.

Julie: I just look forward to the day when the pandemic really is a memory for us, and we're back to a new normal, where, you know, our focus can be on preparing children for kindergarten, right? And we can be thinking about that primarily.

Peg: In our community, where we don't have widespread acceptance of the vaccination, it caused us to be really proud that Knox County Head Start employees embraced the need to keep kids safe and to be vaccinated so that we have the best possible chance of moving forward into a healthier future.

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