

CASE STUDY:

AUGUST 2023

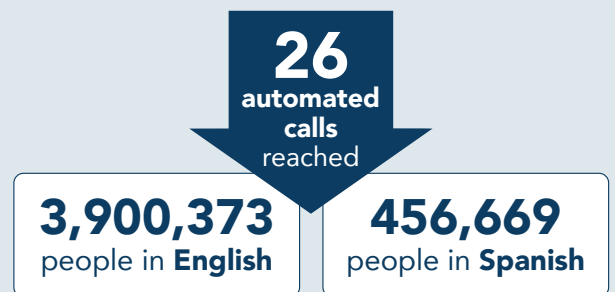
COVID-19 Vaccine Communications Telephone Outreach Program

Distrust in government agencies and rampant misinformation reached new highs during the COVID-19 pandemic, significantly challenging the nation's response and its vaccination effort. Our market research showed that our strongest means to combat these factors were a simple message framework delivered by trusted messengers that respected and addressed people's questions. One activity we undertook to put that approach into practice was a robust telephone outreach program.

This program allowed us to lean into our strategy to meet people where they are – both physically and mentally. By using telephones, people could get information anywhere, rather than having to proactively seek it, and could ask questions and share their fears. In addition, given the minimal production time needed, the phone strategy allowed for rapid response to emerging issues. It was particularly effective for hard-to-reach places and reaching historically marginalized populations.

Overall, more than 490,412 North Carolinians participated in phone townhalls showing significant demand for information. In addition, more than 3,061,745 people were reached through text messaging, and more than 4,357,042 received phone calls from trusted voices. People across the state received calls from former Secretary Mandy Cohen, local doctors and Spanish language influencers encouraging vaccination. This was a critical component of a comprehensive plan that helped the state achieve its goal of providing easy and accessible vaccines to historically marginalized populations.

KEY NUMBERS



Largest Fireside Chat:
Feb 2023, Heart Health and COVID-19
13,000 callers

Largest Cafecito:
August 2022, Back to School
13,995 callers

North Carolina has no gap in initial COVID-19 vaccination between Hispanic and non-Hispanic North Carolinians, and the gap between Black and White North Carolinians is 3%, with no gap in some age groups.

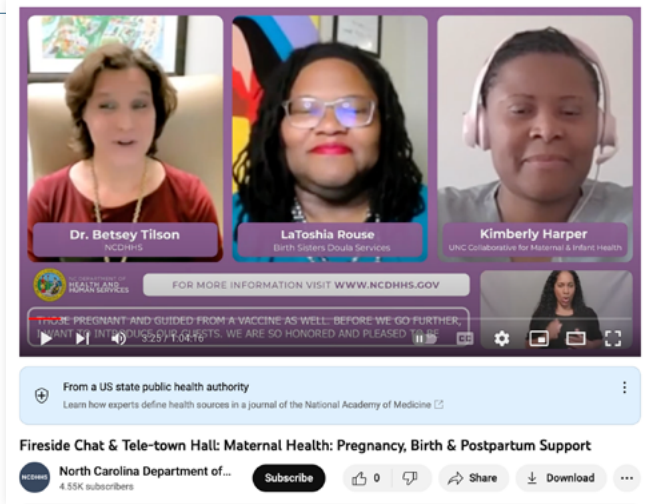
In the face of continued mistrust and misinformation, a phone outreach program should be considered as a component of public health outreach efforts.

Fireside Chats/Cafecitos

Our program evaluation indicates that vaccine educational events have the greatest impact on vaccine adoption. As such, telephone town halls that are also livestreamed events have been an incredibly effective and efficient way to share vaccine information and answer questions.

Through the English language Fireside Chat and Spanish language Cafecito events, each month NCDHHS engaged around 400,000 North Carolinians through telephone and online via Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. We took a creative approach to invite people to the events via phone as well as left a message from a trusted messenger that encouraged COVID-19 vaccination on answering machines. When we wanted to reinforce an important message after an event, we sent an audio clip via text message that included a link to [MySpot.nc.gov](https://www.myspot.nc.gov), or to [Vacunate.nc.gov](https://www.vacunate.nc.gov) if the message was in Spanish.

Perhaps the most important part of these events is that they give North Carolinians the ability to hear from and ask questions of the experts themselves. Each of the 26 Fireside Chats and 16 Cafecitos have engaged and equipped local trusted voices to be message carriers that encourage COVID-19 vaccination. Each month NCDHHS worked with pediatricians, epidemiologists, long COVID specialists,



emergency room doctors, faith leaders and other local health leaders to bring a custom-tailored message that COVID-19 vaccines were safe and effective.

Utilizing the telephone town hall allowed the team to target the audience of each event. This often included statewide, low-income African American and Hispanic families but we customized the universe based on the call content. For an event focused on rural health we were able to target families in rural communities, for an event about Medicaid we were able to call members who have opted into phone communications, for a call during heart health month we increased the age of people we called — and as children were authorized for vaccines, we called families with children 12 and under or five and under.

The Fireside Chats and Cafecitos have continued to have a strong response across the state with attendance remaining consistent two years after the first event was hosted. The average time people spend listening to the events has consistently been above the national average, and every event has had strong and consistent participation in polls and audience questions for speakers. What started as a way for people to participate safely from their homes became a significant forum for disseminating critical health information to people across the state, and remains a way to communicate with much larger numbers of people than traditional in-person events. Over 330,000 North Carolinians have watched or listened to an NCDHHS Fireside Chat and almost 160,000 have participated in a Cafecito since the events started in the spring of 2021.



Texts and Automated Calls

Texts and automated calls allowed NCDHHS Communications to be responsive to changes and proactively share information to a wide audience, quickly and efficiently. For example, when children six months through five years of age were authorized for vaccines on Saturday, June 18, 2022, **Dr. Charlene Wong, a pediatrician and Assistant Secretary for Children and Families, recorded an automated call that went to over 800,000 English speaking families on Monday, June 20, 2022. This was followed by a Spanish language message from Dr. Jennifer Coste-Lopez to 46,000 families** to let them know their children are eligible. These messages were able to be specifically targeted to families with children five and under. When a county was falling behind on vaccinations we worked with the local health department, who identified the owner of the local funeral home as a trusted community messenger. The Funeral Director recorded an automated message that encouraged vaccination and reached thousands of people across the county. As North Carolinians over 65 years old started falling behind on their updated bivalent vaccine dose we were able to quickly push out a message to seniors across the state on the importance of staying up-to-date on their COVID-19 vaccines. Utilizing state vaccine CVMS data we were able to reach out to people due for their second dose or booster and provide a reminder via text or automated call.



Dr. Charlene Wong



Dr. Jennifer Coste-Lopez

We made data-informed decisions based on the most need at any given time of the pandemic, sending out messages to the 20 counties with the highest rates of COVID-19 infections, the 20 counties with the lowest vaccine uptake and the 20 counties with the lowest booster uptake. We also used the tactic to promote other life-saving resources, like telemedicine and COVID-19 treatments. For example, the team sent out an automated call promoting a statewide StarMed Telemedicine program and followed up with texts to over 600 individuals who requested additional details about COVID-19 telemedicine. **Between the spring of 2021 and May of 2023, we sent 20 SMS texts that reached 2,818,756 people in English and 242,989 people in Spanish. We made 26 automated calls that reached 3,900,373 people in English and 456,669 people in Spanish.**

Applying Lessons Learned

The greatest takeaways from the COVID-19 vaccine communications telephone outreach program are that text, automated calls and telephone town halls are an efficient way to quickly communicate important information and updates to large numbers of strategically selected groups of people. For example, if you want more people to opt-in to a specific NCDHHS program, you can design an automated call for people in your targeted demographic who live in key regions letting them know how to participate. Additionally, telephone town halls are an attractive alternative to in-person events, especially if you want to reach a large statewide audience or target a very specific demographic like rural or low-income individuals.

The Neimand Collaborative produced a series of case studies capturing best practices and lessons learned in outreach efforts to support COVID-19 vaccination. Case studies address telephone outreach, lessons learned during COVID-19 vaccine communications, data-focused decisions, Spanish-language outreach and community partnerships. All of the case studies can be found at www.neimandcollaborative.com.