

Governor Phil Murphy

Press Pool Coverage: Governor Murphy, New Jersey Secretary of Higher Education Dr. Brian Bridges, Irvington Mayor Tony Vauss, and N&N Barber Shop Owner Hugea Newman Participate in a Roundtable Discussion on Boosting Vaccine Confidence Among Black Men, Visit Pop-up Barber Shop Vaccination Site

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IRVINGTON – New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy joined Irvington Mayor Tony Vauss on Friday at a local barber shop to encourage more Black residents to get vaccinated.

“This is the war room, this is how we get stuff done in the township of Irvington,” Vauss said as he escorted Murphy to a barber chair inside N & N Unisex Hair Salon on Chancellor Avenue.

Secretary of Higher Education Brian Bridges sat down, too, asking a worker to tighten his fade.

“I wish I had a fade to tighten,” Murphy quipped.

The three men discussed ways to combat misinformation about the vaccine and distrust in government.

“People don’t trust government enough to give government their information or believe that government is doing what they say they’re doing. That’s one of the things in our community that we struggle with,” Vauss said.

“The hesitation is real, the fear is real, we just have to keep plugging away,” he said.

Irvington, which is 86% Black and 10% Hispanic has one of the lowest vaccination rates: Just 35% of its 55,000 residents have been fully vaccinated, the township’s health officer said.

Murphy said it was important for people to know the vaccine is free and highly effective—and barber shops are one way to spread the word.

“In the Black community especially, the barber shop is the place where people go. It’s not just getting a cut, it’s exchanging information, getting caught up on what’s going on,” Murphy said. “When you look at the people who are entering the hospital, they are overwhelmingly unvaccinated.”

Shop owner Hugea Newman, who gave Vauss a haircut next to photos President Obama and Muhammad Ali, said most of his customers who walk in still aren’t vaccinated.

“It’s changing a little but one of the reasons that is happening is because there is misinformation,” he said. “People are definitely afraid.”

Newman and his workers in the barber shop on Friday—who were all wearing masks –have been inoculated.

Bridges said he's also struggling to convince his family to get vaccinated, including his 78-year-old mother, because of how Black people were treated as part of the Tuskegee syphilis study and what happened with Henrietta Lacks.

"Nothing has happened to me I've not turned into a zombie," he said. "The truth tellers have to get out there and start spreading the word."

One barber commented that he trusted the vaccine because the government wouldn't put doctors and nurses, who were first eligible for the shot, in harm's way.

Next to the barber shop, the health department in partnership with a local family set up a pop-up vaccination site where by 2:30 p.m. 14 people had received the shot.

Karen Yi

Reporter

WNYC

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