

Vaccinating Boston's Homeless Community Extends To Those Living on City Streets



Volunteers talk to a sleeping homeless man in South Station during the annual point-in-time homeless census.

Craig Lemoult / WGBH News

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It's been about a month since those experiencing homelessness started getting vaccinated against the coronavirus.

Dr. Jim O'Connell, president of the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program, said his organization has vaccinated about 1,800 people since the vaccine became available. That includes those experiencing homelessness in shelters and shelter staff.

O'Connell said there's been good buy-in from shelter residents, but the challenge becomes accessing and getting buy-in from those living on city streets. He said BHCHP has a van that they plan to use to store doses as they drive to areas in the city where they know people live and sleep to get them vaccinated.

"As we've learned more and more about the struggles you have if you're trying to survive outside or in the shelters with nothing, what you come to realize is that death is ever present," O'Connell said. "So people are not particularly frightened of a virus that feels distant and hard to understand – particularly when you say, 'This could kill you.' They will respond by saying, 'We see people dying every day.' It's not something that intimidates them. So one of the challenges has been to keep a public health focus on this and get people to see that this is to help not only you, but all of your neighbors. What has been surprising for us is there is a real community feel among people who are struggling at the bottom of the rung. And in the shelters, we've been noticing that people want to get vaccinated not only for themselves, but so that everybody will be OK. And that's a pretty astonishing reaction, I think, from people who have really been left out of most things in this world, certainly most of our dreams."

We also heard from Stephen Curry, the director of public health for the city of Fitchburg and the chairman of the Montachusett Public Health Network, which consists of 13 cities and towns in central Massachusetts. He said that because of limited vaccine supply, the network is not getting enough vaccine doses for area residents. With the nearest mass vaccination site over an hour away, he said that doesn't bode well for those 65 and older who are now eligible to sign up.

Click on the audio player above to listen to the full episode.

Segments:

Stephen Curry - 2:32

Dr. Jim O'Connell - 16:03