

Vote and Vax:

Setting up a Successful Clinic
in Your Community

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Dear Colleagues,

As you know, flu shots save lives and prevent hospitalizations. To my mind, they are heroic—although when I talk about them I usually don't say more than that they save money. Getting flu shots to the people they protect most means finding new ways to deliver them. We just can't expect everyone to show up at the doctor's office. When SPARC (Sickness Prevention Achieved through Regional Collaboration) began its work in 1995, the job of exploring fresh community sites for flu shots was left to SPARC's Executive Director Donna DiMartino. Donna is a public health nurse with a sharp eye—she is drawn right away to fresh and innovative ways of doing things.

Health and politics do not always mix well, but Donna and our nursing colleagues around the community began to explore an idea that had been piloted in the South, but that no one was trying in New England. Could SPARC and its collaborators offer flu shots to seniors on voting day? Older Americans, more than any other group, show up for Election Day—which happens to fall right in the middle of flu shot season. Donna read a few articles on the topic and made some phone calls. Before long everyone in the health care community that we contacted was on board.

However, there was a problem. We discovered an old Connecticut statute that prohibited commercial activities of any kind near a polling station. Donna was not to be deterred. How often have you heard someone say: "If you're not happy with the policy, change the law"? Donna decided that this was the only way ahead, although she had no idea how to proceed.

In collaboration with the area's state representative—who happened to sit on one of SPARC's community action committees—she began to build a strategy.

I remember very well the day that Donna was invited to testify at a hearing before the Connecticut legislature. We opened the champagne, and a month later, on a cold winter's afternoon, she made our case. Nervous, poised, and effective, Donna barreled forward. Her persuasive presentation and the follow-up questions took no more than 30 minutes. Soon after, to our delight, the Committee instructed the State Attorney General to review the law with an eye to permitting the clinics to go ahead.

And so the next year, Connecticut's first *Vote and Vax* campaign was born. Staffed by a local visiting nursing agency—and with the support of the local public health department, the mayor and the state legislature—Election Day also became immunization day in Salisbury, Connecticut. Seniors were invited to get their flu shot as they left the polling station. It was an extraordinary success—I know we vaccinated both Democrats and Republicans. The following year, *Vote and Vax* clinics appeared across the county and have since become part of the way flu shots are delivered in all communities in which SPARC is active. Thousands of elders have been immunized—many of whom had never previously received a flu shot.

Sincerely,

Douglas Shenson, M.D., M.P.H.

president, SPARC (Sickness Prevention Achieved through Regional Collaboration)
and project director, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation *Vote and Vax* Initiative

Background

We hope you will find this “How-To” manual helpful. The manual is written for mass immunizers with some experience delivering flu shots—and even pneumococcal immunizations—at public clinics. The toolkit focuses on the distinctive challenges that are part of setting up and operating a *Vote and Vax* clinic.

Vote and Vax As a Public Health Strategy

On November 8, 2005, more than 100 million Americans will come together to vote at their local community polling places. Approximately half of these people will be aged 50 or older. As you are aware, a flu shot is recommended for everyone 50 and older, and for individuals with medical conditions that put them at increased risk of contracting influenza. Influenza epidemics are responsible for approximately 20,000 deaths annually; together with pneumonia influenza represents the fifth leading cause of death in the elderly.

While most community immunization campaigns are in full swing earlier in the fall, Election Day represents a particularly good opportunity to make contact with those who have not been reached by earlier efforts. Since polling places must meet strict accessibility requirements, they are places that are welcoming to vulnerable populations. Pilot *Vote and Vax* projects have now been tested successfully in several states, including efforts by SPARC’s coalitions in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York, and by a state immunization partnership in Virginia.

Some Background Information about Local Elections

General elections are held in even-numbered years on the Tuesday between November 2nd and November 8th—that is, on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November. Most states have elections every year, at which time community residents are asked to make choices about all kinds of local issues and candidates for office. Elections are usually run by counties, cities or townships. In 2002, Congress passed the *Help America Vote Act* to assure improved accessibility and that every eligible voter actually gets to vote.

Getting Started

Your first and most important partner in getting a *Vote and Vax* clinic off the ground is the local election authority. As noted earlier, your election authority may be situated at the state, county or municipal level. The local election authority is likely to be listed in the phone book in the section on local government under elections, board of elections, supervisor of elections, clerk, registrar or auditor. You can also consult the Web site of the Federal Election Commission, www.fec.gov. Once you are at this Web site, connect to “Elections and Voting” and then to “The Administrative Structure of State Election Offices.” You will find your state on that Web page.

Once you have introduced yourself to local election officials, you will want to learn about local regulations governing activities in the vicinity of polling places. It is essential that *Vote and Vax* clinics conform to local or state laws. The election authorities will be especially concerned about any potential impediments to the flow of voters, to any nearby partisan political activity, and to the presence of unnecessary distractions to voters.

It is sometimes useful to offer to sign a Letter of Agreement (see page 11 for an example) so that election officials understand that you recognize there are strict guidelines to be followed. As you build your case for launching a *Vote and Vax* clinic, you may want to point election officials to examples of similar activities in other states, or even within your own state.

One cautionary note: *Vote and Vax* campaigns are not exercises in political partisanship. Public health campaigns work because they promote good health in the community without reference to any person’s political affiliation. Immunizers should therefore provide vaccinations to all appropriate recipients regardless of whether they vote. *Vote and Vax* clinics are in no way designed for the exclusive benefit of voters, nor should they be used as “get out the vote” activities. The integrity of these efforts depends on assuring politically equitable access to immunization services.

Choosing The Right Polling Place

The next step is to research polling place locations. It is important to think about your target populations. During the last 20 years, the level of influenza delivery has increased dramatically. However, vaccination levels among minority populations lag behind those of others. For example, while 1999 vaccination levels were 69.0% among non-Hispanic whites aged >65, they were only 50.6% among non-Hispanic blacks and 54.8% among Hispanics in the same age range.¹ It is sometimes helpful to use the demographic information gathered by the census to help prioritize locations for flu shot clinics. This information is available for your community from the U.S. Census Bureau www.census.gov, and is stratified by county, city and congressional district.

Voting usually takes place in buildings that are open to the public, such as a school, city hall or a community center. Although you may be attracted to their location because of the needs of the local community, consider operational factors as well. Is there parking available nearby? Is there space to accommodate a clinic? If not, is there an appropriate facility in the immediate vicinity? Is there a place in the designated space for registering for a flu shot and sufficient area for people to line up to be vaccinated? Further, consider whether disabled or infirm individuals can easily move between the polling area and the clinic. As with all flu shot clinics, you should contact the custodial staff to review your plans and your set-up with them.

Training Your Staff

If you use volunteers to help staff your adult immunization clinics you will need to offer them in-service training before flu shot season begins. It is important that if your agency or department is going to offer *Vote and Vax* clinics, your volunteers and professional health care workers should understand the ground rules for operating clinics at polling places. Most of these rules are noted below. Some immunizers have found it helpful to invite an election official to speak directly to their staff.

¹ CDC. Public Health and Aging: influenza vaccination coverage among adults aged >50 years and pneumococcal vaccination coverage among adults aged >65 years – United States, 2002. *MMWR*2003;52(41):987-992.

What To Expect On Election Day

Polling hours vary from community to community, but usually open between 6 a.m. and 8 a.m. and close between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. The middle of the day—between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m.—is often the slowest time at the polling place. Nonetheless, this might be the period during which large numbers of elderly voters come to the polling place. The hours at which the clinic remains open should coincide with times that most of your target population arrives to vote. An experienced local election official will be a good source of advice.

A variety of people work at polling places, and it is helpful to understand their roles and responsibilities. Election judges are in charge of polling places. Some states will have a Democratic and a Republican election judge at each polling place. Poll workers, who are usually volunteers, check in voters and explain to them where and how to vote. Frequently, there are also observers from political parties who are there to make sure that their party is being fairly treated.

Polling places are mandated to be accessible. This includes accommodating people with disabilities. Starting in 2006, every polling place in the United States will be required to accommodate people with disabilities and to make sure they can vote privately and independently. In communities with large numbers of persons who speak a language other than English, federal law requires that there be voting materials available in that language. This includes Spanish, Asian languages, and American Indian and Alaskan native languages. If your clinic is active in such a community, you should have materials about adult immunizations that are written in that language.

Vote and Vax clinics should always offer immunizations to voters *after* they have voted. Please coordinate your activities with polling place personnel responsible for directing the flow of voters, and be mindful of the signage, traffic cones, and handicap ramps. At peak times there will be a crowd, and wherever there are large crowds, local law enforcement will be making sure there is adequate security. It is important for the immunizing agency to work closely with them in directing individuals to their destination.

Outreach and Publicity

Let people know they can find you at the polls! The point of creating these clinics is to make getting a flu shot as convenient as possible. Many elders will be grateful that they can fulfill their civic responsibilities and protect themselves from influenza on the same trip. In the colder states, enabling elders to accomplish both of these things during the same outing represents a valuable service.

Outreach methods might include printing flyers and posters. Developing public service announcements for radio and local cable TV is also a good idea. Where funding is available, advertisements placed in local papers will help spread the word. The telephone number of the local health department can be offered as a contact point for people to call with questions. Consider making a request to appear on a local call-in radio—you might want to offer a representative from your agency or department and a local election official. Health editors of local newspapers should be mailed press kits detailing the campaign. Remember, newspapers and TV stations may want to send a reporter to a polling place to see the clinic in action.

Vote and Vax clinics are still a novelty. Launching these clinics provides an opportunity for your community to learn about the services that your agency offers. Letting others know that you have organized a *Vote and Vax* clinic also demonstrates that you are an innovative and committed provider.

What if Flu Shot Supplies are Low?

In recent years, the flu shot supply has been unpredictable—particularly in early November. Nonetheless, *Vote and Vax* clinics have continued their work, and have offered a variety disease prevention and health promotion services. These have included:

- Providing general information about adult immunizations and flu prevention tips.
- Providing information about which groups have been prioritized to receive flu shots and about how to obtain a flu shot if a person is in a priority group.
- Providing other preventive measures. These interventions have included pneumococcal vaccinations, tetanus shots, hepatitis shots, and screening services for cardiovascular disease.
- Referral information and/or appointments for mammograms.

The idea is to exploit in the most effective way an annual opportunity to reach large numbers of older adults. *Vote and Vax* providers should therefore plan for the contingency that flu shot supplies may be low, and should obtain adequate stocks of other vaccines or of health promotion materials they believe will be of benefit to their community.

Did We Do Any Good?

It is always a good idea to measure whether or not you're having an impact. One outcome that is easy to determine is the number of flu shots that you delivered at the *Vote and Vax* clinic. How does this number compare with your other flu shot clinics, or if applicable, to last year's *Vote and Vax*? You may also want to assess whether the clinic at the polling place is immunizing clients who would normally get their shot elsewhere—or whether you are reaching individuals who are not in the habit of getting vaccinated. To begin to answer this question, you can ask clients, perhaps when they register, whether they had a flu shot last year. You can further refine your assessment by noting the gender and age of persons who are being immunized. This will help you identify and reach out to those groups who are not coming to the clinic.

Another set of measures will help you improve the operation of your *Vote and Vax* clinic. Here are some questions to ask yourself and your colleagues, and where possible, your clients:

1. How convenient was client flow?
2. Were flu shot recipients satisfied with your *Vote and Vax* clinic(s)?
3. Were election authorities satisfied with the clinic(s)?
4. Were there any particular difficulties?
5. Would you repeat the clinic next year?
6. Would you recommend that other immunizers develop *Vote and Vax* clinics?

It would, of course, be helpful to know if *Vote and Vax* clinics are adding to the total number of flu shots delivered to members of your community. Unfortunately, it is difficult to obtain the information necessary to evaluate this question.

Conclusion

This initiative lays the groundwork for a much larger effort, one aimed at making preventive services such as immunizations increasingly accessible to vulnerable populations across the country. The establishment of regular *Vote and Vax* clinics represents an important milestone along that road. It is our hope that public health departments across the country will build on our shared experience, and incorporate this fresh strategy in their efforts protects the health of our communities.

The following Web sites offer information about adult immunizations, voting and elections, and your community.

ADULT IMMUNIZATIONS

www.cdc.gov/NIP The National Immunization Program of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides leadership for the planning, coordination, and conduct of immunization activities nationwide. Their Web site provides extensive information on immunization guidelines, immunization data and statistics, and a variety of resources for practitioners and health departments.

www.cdc.gov/MMWR The Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) is a CDC publication that gives an account of specific infectious diseases, including influenza and pneumococcal disease. The MMWR also issues reports from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. This data system tracks the utilization of adult immunizations nationally and by state.

www.medicare.gov The official U.S. Government site for people with Medicare provides a good deal of beneficiary-oriented material on the importance of getting a flu shot. A search for flu shot at the site will connect you with a list of relevant downloadable documents and answers to frequently asked questions.

ELECTIONS

www.fec.gov The Web site of the Federal Elections Commission FEC provides links to a variety of non-partisan Web sites concerned with voting.

YOUR COMMUNITY

www.census.gov In addition to any locally-based Web sites—such as those of your town, city or county—the Bureau of the Census has established a Web site from which you can obtain detailed demographic information about your community. This information is useful in targeting your efforts for particular populations and for prioritizing the selection of local polling places at which to situate immunization clinics.

Appendix

SAMPLE LETTER OF AGREEMENT

The following text serves as an example of a letter of agreement that must be obtained from the local Election Authority. This letter should appear on the Authority's letterhead and can be tailored to local requirements:

<Date>

Dear <insert name>:

We have been requested to permit <NAME OF ORGANIZATION> to operate an immunization clinic on Election Day, November 8, 2005, in proximity to the following polling places:

<NAME AND ADDRESS OF POLLING PLACE(S)>

The <NAME OF LOCAL ELECTION AUTHORITY> has no objection to this activity where it is in compliance with state and local laws and regulations, including the following:

- <NAME OF PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY> will abide by all local regulations regarding the placement of activities in proximity to polling places.
- <NAME OF PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY> will in no way impede the free flow of persons to or from the polling place.
- <NAME OF PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY> will not engage in any partisan political activity in connection with operating the immunization clinic.
- <NAME OF PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY> will locate the clinic at a mutually agreed upon location a reasonable distance from the polling place.

(Name)

(Title)

(Date)