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Baltimore among five cities tapped for Rockefeller Foundation's \$20M vaccine equity pilot

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The Rockefeller Foundation is investing \$20 million in a new initiative focused on improving Covid-19 vaccine access and equity that is set to roll out in Baltimore and four other pilot cities.

The foundation's new Equity-First Vaccination Initiative is aimed at closing vaccination gaps among communities of color, which have been disproportionately impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The initiative will be piloted in Baltimore, Chicago, Houston, Newark, New Jersey, and Oakland, California. The foundation will provide grant funding to anchor organizations in each of these cities, which will work with community-based partners to increase access and confidence in the coronavirus vaccines. The specific amount of funding that will be allotted to each city was not disclosed.

In Baltimore, the grant funding will be distributed through Open Society Institute (OSI)-Baltimore. The organization will deliver sub-grants to various nonprofits, health care advocacy groups, neighborhood associations and religious institutions in some of Baltimore's hardest hit neighborhoods to support efforts to address vaccine questions and concerns, and to increase access through new mobile and community vaccination sites. The Rockefeller funding will also help to connect the grantees with public health communications experts who can provide evidence-based information to combat vaccine misinformation and hesitancy.

Scott Nolen, director of the Addiction and Health Equity program, said OSI-Baltimore is collaborating with the Baltimore City Health

Department to determine which communities it should target with the equity-focused grants and partnerships. He noted that OSI-Baltimore wants to make sure the Equity-First Vaccination Initiative complements some of the vaccine distribution efforts that are already going on in and around the city.

"We want to figure out where the gaps are, so we can direct funding and resources to address those gaps," Nolen said. "This is going to be a really focused effort on engaging people where they are, and making sure our vulnerable communities are not left out."

Locally and across the nation, glaring gaps in vaccine access have become apparent. National data shows people of color are three times as likely to be hospitalized and twice as likely to die due to Covid-19 infection. They also represent less than one-third of the nearly 70 million people who are now fully vaccinated in the United States.

"Because of existing structural inequalities — including health care access, wealth gaps and systematic racism — people of color have been much more likely to both contract Covid-19 and die from this virus," Otis Rolley, senior vice President for the U.S. Equity and Economic Opportunity Initiative, said in a statement. "The Rockefeller Foundation is launching this initiative because a vaccination strategy that does not seek to directly combat inequities stands to further entrench them."

The foundation selected the pilot cities based on a number of factors, including their populations of Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC), poverty rates, and existing equity-focused partnerships and initiatives, Rolley said. The five cities represent about five million of the nation's 95 million adults of color. A preliminary poll, issued by HIT Strategies with support from the Rockefeller Foundation, of people of color in the five cities found that while about 72% of respondents want to get vaccinated, roughly 62% of them do not know how to go about getting access.

The foundation hopes to use data and lessons learned from the five pilot cities to expand the Equity-First Vaccination Initiative and ensure that at least 70 million people of color are vaccinated by July 2021. The foundation will also share information with federal,

state and local governments to help inform and grow vaccine equity efforts nationwide.

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