'There's a lack of trust': United Houma Nation works to reduce inequity, vaccine skepticism

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As the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine continues in Louisiana, it has not yet reached all Louisianans.

Native Americans and other communities of color have often been left behind, facing issues from lack of vaccine access in rural areas to skepticism based on historical discrimination in the medical system.

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United Houma Nation Principal Chief August Creppel, who balances guiding his tribe with his job as a firefighter in Gretna, sees the issue from two different sides.

Creppel said getting the vaccine is an act of service for his community.

“If I don’t keep myself healthy, then I won’t be healthy enough to take care of my kids, grandkids and all of my tribal citizens,” Creppel said.

Fear of the unknown weighed heavily for him and his team. he said, especially at the beginning of the pandemic.

“When the COVID first broke out, there was no information for it," Creppell said. "We wore surgical masks when we went to these people house’s since we’re not just responding to fires. Each time we went to work we didn’t know what we would face.”

Creppel said the disease has affected him personally, including when he contracted COVID in December.

"I thank God I had no symptoms but I had friends in the fire department who died from it,” Creppel said. “When the opportunity arose with the fire department to get the vaccine, I got...
the first shot and it knocked me down for two days with fever and stuff like that since I had COVID before. The second shot just some soreness in my arm.”

The United Houma Nation has around 19,000 enrolled members across six parishes in Louisiana, but the tribe lacks the money or infrastructure to determine who from the tribe has already been vaccinated. Also, the lack of federal recognition of the tribe precludes getting doses allocated specifically to tribal members.

Tribal Administrator-Director Lanor Curole, who sits on the Louisiana COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force, and the tribe's Community Outreach Coordinator Tyler Duplantis work to examine why some communities were harder hit by the pandemic than others, and address the inequity.

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Curole had her own personal experience with COVID-19. In December, she tested positive for COVID-19, and ran a fever for nine days and had a lingering cough till the end of February. During this time she was quarantined and working from home.

“People don’t talk about what the disease does to you mentally,” Curole said. “When I was finally able to get out of the house and feel the sunshine on my face in the car, it was wonderful.”

Now Curole, Duplantis and the Office of Public Health have been working together to identify areas where people are either unable of unwilling to receive the vaccine.

Dulac is one of those areas, where a large portion of the population are tribal members. Many are also elders, who are most vulnerable to exposure.

The closest vaccination site is 17 miles away, and many people don’t have access to transportation or technology to book a vaccine appointment, according to Duplantis. Others have expressed a lack of trust in the medical system, he said.

“Intergenerational trauma is something that deters people from having that trust to taking the vaccine,” Duplantis said, “By saying that, we are taking steps to build community trust and take steps to have the community’s questions and concerns answered by the Office of Public Health and supplemented by the United Houma Nation.”

Creppel said the message to get tribal members to vaccinate must be able to overcome history.
“Sometimes minorities feel that there’s still some prejudice in the medical system,” Creppel said. “Our people have been lied to by the government and there’s a lack of trust. It’s our place to help educate as much as possible.”

The United Houma Nation hopes to gather information like the number of tribal members who received the vaccine, and use that information to determine where tribal members would want to receive the vaccine, identify where residents would trust as vaccination sites and determine the feasibility of the Office of Public Health providing transportation to those sites.

Duplantis said he sees the value of leading by example.

“A large amount of our staff and our chief have already taken the vaccine. We’re not only doing it to protect ourselves but also for the community as well. We want to get to the point where we can do events again,” Duplantis said. “Through vaccination, we’re hoping that we’ll be able to come together again and share our culture and traditions.”