

May 26, 2021

Thank you to Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Pallone and Ranking Member Cathy McMorris Rodgers and Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee Chairwoman Diana DeGette and Ranking Member Morgan Griffith for convening the hearing "A Shot at Normalcy: Building COVID-19 Vaccine Confidence." We appreciate the opportunity to submit a statement for the record and we look forward to working with you to ensure that as many people as possible get the information they need about the COVID-19 vaccine.

The American Kidney Fund (AKF) fights kidney disease on all fronts as the nation's leading kidney nonprofit and works on behalf of the 37 million Americans living with kidney disease and the millions more at risk. An integral part our mission is to fight health disparities, which have been brought into sharp focus by the COVID-19 pandemic and its disproportionate impact on communities of color. We knew the communities that we have served for 50 years would be the communities hardest hit by COVID-19.

People of color are at high risk of developing advanced kidney disease due in part to high rates of hypertension and diabetes, the two leading causes of kidney disease. For example, while Blacks are 13% of the population, they are 35% of the people receiving dialysis. Additionally, the people we serve are from racial and ethnic groups who have apprehensions about vaccines due to historical events concerning the medical establishment and communities of color.

With these concerns in mind, AKF has been working since late December 2020 to encourage people living with kidney disease to get the COVID-19 vaccine. They are at greater risk of COVID-19-related complications, hospitalization and even death. People who are on dialysis are particularly vulnerable to the virus, especially those who travel to and from dialysis clinics for their life-saving treatment and may be unable to social distance. In fact, recent studies have now shown that the mortality rate was over 20% for those on dialysis who were infected with COVID-19.<sup>i ii</sup>

We created a landing page on our website with information about the vaccine, including "Frequently Asked Questions" and personal stories from our patient ambassadors who had received the vaccine. We have advertised our website through social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, and we emailed a link to the website out to our mailing list, which consists of 140,000 patients, caregivers, advocates and donors. We also worked hard to ensure that everyone with kidney disease has access to the vaccine.

Among those efforts was working closely with the Biden-Harris Administration to get vaccines sent directly to dialysis clinics, a program that was announced on March 25. This was especially important in efforts to reach underserved and minority populations. Sending vaccines directly to the places where most dialysis patients receive treatment three times per week ensures that many of these patients will receive it.

As a patient organization, we believe that peer-to-peer information sharing is vital to increasing confidence in the vaccine. We used our website as a platform for patients to encourage each other. Among the stories we shared is one from Patrick Gee, a kidney transplant recipient in Richmond, Virginia: “I am grateful to say that I have received both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. I did it as extra protection for my kidney. The only side effect I had was some minor pain around the vaccination site.”

Another story comes from Leigh Ann Williams, a dialysis patient from New Orleans. Ms. Williams said that “I was hesitant to get vaccinated right away, but I realized as a patient advocate, a health care professional and a Black woman, it was critical to lead by example and encourage others in the community to trust the science and get vaccinated.”

David Rodriguez, a kidney transplant recipient from San Antonio said that “My kidney transplant has allowed me to live a positive and healthy life. It has also given me the opportunity to fulfill my goal of working in the medical field to help others who are living with kidney disease. I am thankful to have received my shot and recommend that everyone who can do the same.”

We continue to work to increase vaccine rates among kidney disease patients, and we thank the Committee for holding this important hearing.

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<sup>i</sup> Van Beusekom, Mary. “Dialysis Patients at nearly 4 times the risk for COVID death.” *CIDRAP News*, February 4, 2021. <https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2021/02/dialysis-patients-nearly-4-times-risk-covid-death>

<sup>ii</sup> Hsu, Caroline M., et al. “COVID-19 Among US Dialysis Patients: Risk Factors and Outcomes From a National Dialysis Provider.” *American Journal of Kidney Diseases*, vol. 77, no.5, May 1, 2021, pp. 748-756. [https://www.ajkd.org/article/S0272-6386\(2021\)2900025-1/fulltext](https://www.ajkd.org/article/S0272-6386(2021)2900025-1/fulltext)