



COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution

City of Seattle & King County, Washington

Providing equitable access to vaccines through a collaborative effort

I. Overview

The approval of COVID-19 vaccines was a pivotal moment in the pandemic—but obtaining and distributing adequate amounts of the shots proved difficult across the United States, at least initially. Beginning in late 2020, the City of Seattle and Washington's King County partnered on a campaign to quickly and equitably distribute COVID-19 vaccines to residents throughout the region. Working together with a broad network of cross-sector partners, including hospitals and healthcare clinics, employers, and community- and faith-based organizations, the City and County successfully deployed a multimodal vaccine delivery model that included high-volume sites such as mass-vaccination hubs, medium-capacity sites such as pharmacies or grocery stores, and flexible, low-volume sites such as mobile vaccine teams or pop-up vaccination clinics.

All partners in the collaboration coalesced around a shared commitment to equity, working hard to address and overcome transportation, digital access, language, and other barriers facing older adults, people of color, and other communities disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The City and County set aggressive vaccination goals, and by June 2021, the City had become the first city in the country to vaccinate 70% of residents.



County/City Demographic Profile

	King County, WA ¹	Seattle, WA ²
Size (square miles)	2,115	84
Total Population	2,252,782	753,655
Population Density	1,065/sq. mile	8,987/sq. mile
Race & Ethnicity		
Asian	19%	17%
Black or African American	7%	7%
Hispanic	10%	7%
White	58%	64%
Other	7%	7%
Workforce & Economic Indicators		
Unemployment Rate	2.5%	2.7%
Poverty Rate (persons below poverty line)	7.6%	9.8%
Child Poverty Rate (<18 below poverty line)	7%	7%
Median Household Income	\$102,594	\$102,486

City/County Governance

The City of Seattle uses a Mayor–Council form of government. The nine–member City Council serves as the City's primary legislative body, and the Mayor serves as the City's chief executive. King County is governed by a County Council and an elected County Executive.

1. U.S. Census Bureau (2019), American Community Survey one–year estimates. Retrieved from <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/05000US53033-king-county-wa/>

2. U.S. Census Bureau (2019), American Community Survey one–year estimates. Retrieved from <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US5363000-seattle-wa/>

II. Need for Collaboration/The Challenge

The state of Washington was an epicenter of COVID-19, with the first official U.S. case of the disease, first disease-related death, and the first declaration of emergency related to the COVID-19 pandemic.³ All eyes were on the state and its largest city, Seattle, as they unrolled various phases of a COVID response.

The pandemic magnified existing racial and socioeconomic inequities in Seattle and King County, disproportionately impacting specific populations, including people of color, people living in South King County, and older adults.

- Compared to white peers, rates of COVID-19 were nearly five times higher among Hispanic/Latinx residents and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander residents, two times higher among Black and American Indian/Alaskan Native residents, and 15% higher among Asian American residents.
- South King County and pockets in the County's far north and east experienced COVID-19 positivity rates five times higher than in other areas.
- 85% of all COVID-related deaths in the region have been among people aged 65 or older.⁴

COVID-19 Rates Compared to White Peers

2x

among
Hispanic/Latinx
Native Hawaiian/Pacific
Islander residents

5x

among
Black and American
Indian/Alaskan Native
residents

15%

among
Asian American
residents

While getting vaccinated is the best way to reduce the risk of catching or transmitting COVID-19, individuals in the highest-need populations faced unique challenges to vaccine access. King County knew that no single vaccine delivery mechanism would be sufficient to ensuring optimal vaccine dissemination for all. Thus, partnerships and collaboration were critical to implementing multimodal distribution channels that would ensure high levels of vaccine access.

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3. Taylor, D. B. (2020). A Timeline of the Coronavirus Pandemic, *The New York Times*. Retrieved October 14, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/coronavirus-timeline.html>

National Preparedness Assessment Division. (2021). Preparedness Grant Effectiveness Case Study: Washington. https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_washington-covid-19-case-study_2020.pdf

4. King County Daily COVID-19 outbreak summary dashboard, as of October 15, 2021. <https://kingcounty.gov/depts/health/covid-19/data/daily-summary.aspx>

To address the pandemic, a regional approach maximized resources and increased efficiency. Unfortunately, collaboration between the City and the County was inherently challenging, as the County was focused on equitable regional delivery, while the City was focused specifically on Seattle residents. The City quickly set up its infrastructure and was ready to deliver thousands of vaccines; however, with vaccines scarce, tensions emerged between City and County allocation priorities. The County used demographic data to identify areas of highest need and lowest vaccine rates and allocated vaccines in proportion to need. Due to this, resources were not equally distributed across the County based on population numbers, and Seattle was not initially considered a high-need area.

III. The Partners

- Public Health Seattle and King County (PHSKC)
- City of Seattle: Mayor's Office, Fire Department, Budget Office, and Finance and Administrative Services
- Local hospital systems (not an exhaustive list): EvergreenHealth, Overlake Medical Center & Clinics, Kaiser Permanente, and Swedish Health Services
- Community-based organizations (not an exhaustive list): African American Reach and Teach Health ministry, Asian Counseling and Referral Service, Centro Cultural Mexicano, Pacific Islander Community Association of Washington, and Living Well Kent
- Private sector (not an exhaustive list): Microsoft, Starbucks, Lumen Field, and labor unions

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IV. The Shared Goal

The County's goal was to vaccinate a minimum of 70% of all adults across racial and ethnic groups and regions by June 30, 2021.

The goal of COVID-19 vaccine distribution efforts in Seattle/King County was to provide as many residents with access to the vaccine as possible, focusing specifically on equity and access among the elderly and communities of color. All partners in the vaccination effort agreed to a set of shared equity principles⁵ that emphasized the needs of high-risk groups and promoted transparency and inclusion.

These equity principles include:



V. How Partners Collaborated

The County developed a [public-facing data dashboard](#) that provided transparency and also gave partners access to real-time outcomes data on the status of distribution efforts. This dashboard summarizes the number of doses among County residents by date administered, in addition to key demographics such as residents with at least one dose documented by race/ethnicity and by age. The dashboard also reports vaccination by geography, mapping uptake by region of the county.

This dashboard was key to the City and County collaboration, as it provided data to support agreed-upon equity principles. City, County, and partner agencies leveraged this data to identify gaps and adjust vaccine distribution activities to ensure equitable access across race, ethnicity, age, and geography. Leveraging real-time data enabled the City and County to collaborate and respond quickly in ways that would not have been possible without a coordinated data dashboard.



Structure of the Collaboration

King County initially developed a unified strategy for vaccine distribution that prioritized underserved communities. The City of Seattle subsequently created a strategy aligned with that of the County. The vaccine distribution partnership between the City and the County was formalized through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

5. Seattle & King County Public Health. (2021). Principles for Equitable Vaccine Delivery - King County. https://kingcounty.gov/depts/health/covid-19/~/_media/depts/health/communicable-diseases/documents/C19/king-county-principles-vaccine-delivery.ashx

As the County's health authority, the King County public health department (Public Health—Seattle & King County, or PHSKC):

- Issued health orders and policy directives;
- Facilitated the distribution of national and state funding for vaccines;
- Developed and maintained a centralized, publicly available data dashboard;
- Provided strategic guidance for the County, including establishing principles for equitable vaccine delivery; and
- Served communities outside of Seattle with high-volume vaccination sites, mobile vaccine teams, and more.

PHSKC led the King County Vaccination Partnership effort, for which it partnered with health care and private sector partners to deliver vaccines in 19 fixed sites, in addition to mobile teams and vaccination events across the County.

The City provided additional strategic direction specific to Seattle including an equity-focused vaccination plan. Once a shared plan was in place, the City partnered with the County led public vaccine sites in Seattle, ranging from mobile and local community sites to Lumen Field, the largest civilian run site in the nation. Furthermore, the City provided various staff on loan to help set up County-wide infrastructure.



The collaboration was further enhanced by connecting staff experts in similar roles across the City and County. By including line-level staff and program managers who understood operations on the ground, the City and County increased transparency and ensured processes were aligned.



Funding Sources

King County allocated \$7 million in special funding from its own budget for the vaccine distribution program.⁶

6. Robertson, K. (2021). Mass COVID-19 Vaccination Sites and Mobile Units Planned for King County. <https://www.king5.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/vaccine/king-county-vaccination-sites/281-2e5b3377-207f-4ae1-8414-c5f521f7e020>
Constantine, D. (2021). Seattle & King County Expand Vaccination Services to Provide COVID-19 Boosters for Eligible People. <https://kingcounty.gov/elected/executive/constantine/news/release/2021/September/27-vax-boosters-and-access-points.aspx>

VI. Keys to Success

- **Shared commitment and goals:** The City, County, and distribution partners coalesced around a commitment to equity and developed equity principles to formalize this commitment.
- **Trust and open communication:**
 - » **Regular cadence of meetings:** Collaborative partners met regularly to ensure efforts were aligned. Pandemic response protocols changed daily, so these meetings were essential.
 - » **Alignment between City and County counterparts** ensured collaboration on the ground was possible and efficient.
 - » **History of collaboration and trust:** The City and the County had established trust by working together to set up COVID-19 testing sites, as well as a registration process for residents to sign up for testing. A staff member from the Seattle Mayor's Office went to work with the County at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing technical support and expertise. This staffer was integral to establishing institutional and personal relationships that laid the groundwork for a collaborative vaccine distribution effort.
- **Strong data systems:**
 - » **Highly transparent real-time data dashboard:** A data dashboard was created so that all partners knew exactly what progress was being made in the distribution efforts.
 - » **Data-driven strategy:** City, County, and partner agencies agreed on the equity principles and then leveraged the data from the dashboard to explain and execute their vaccine distribution efforts. They leveraged this data to identify gaps and adjust vaccine distribution activities to ensure equitable access across race, ethnicity, age and geography.

VII. Challenges & Lessons Learned

Scarce resources placed the City and County in competition for vaccines.

When vaccines were scarce, there was tension between City and County priorities for allocations. The County did not have enough vaccine doses for everyone who wanted them across the jurisdiction. Thus, the County used demographic data to identify areas of highest need and lowest vaccine rates, and allocated vaccines in proportion to need. City officials were frustrated initially, as the City has a large population but lower need in comparison to the surrounding cities in the County.

Competing interests are a challenge, but not insurmountable.

Each local government must advocate for the needs of its constituents and align with the priorities of its respective elected officials and governing bodies. The competing interests that arise from each government having its own unique set of priorities and needs make collaboration between different

governing bodies a challenge. However, the City and County were able to address this challenge by adopting shared norms, specifically the norm of "always assume positive intent" and equity principles.

VIII. Collaboration Impact

The partnership between King County and Seattle is seen as a major success by local leaders. Seattle Mayor Durkan said, "Seattle has led the way by listening to our public health officials and speaking as one government—it's why we have the lowest cases, hospitalizations, and deaths of every major city and one of the highest vaccination rates."⁷ The County's goal was to vaccinate a minimum of 70% of all adults across racial and ethnic groups and regions of the County by June 30, 2021. As a result of the collaboration, they achieved the following outcomes:

- As of March 2021, 20% of King County residents had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and 11.2% had been fully vaccinated.⁸
- By June 2021, the City had become the first city in the country to vaccinate 70% of residents (at least one dose of vaccine).⁹
- By September 2021, the County also reported achieving over 70% vaccination coverage, although gaps in vaccination for certain communities persisted.¹⁰
 - » As of October 21, 2021, 82.4% of eligible residents age 12+ had been fully vaccinated, and 87.8% of residents had received at least one dose.
 - » As of October 19, 2021, among those age 12+, 79.8% of Black/African American residents and 78.1% of Hispanic/Latinx residents had received at least one dose of vaccine.

Although it is too soon to tell the long-standing impact of the collaboration on City and County operations, the collaboration will be ongoing for the foreseeable future as the City and County continue to vaccinate residents against COVID-19 and begin to ramp up distribution of free booster vaccines for those who need them. The partners continue to work together to expand access to vaccinations and boosters and needs evolve and additional groups become eligible.¹¹

7. Constantine, D. (2021). Seattle & King County Expand Vaccination Services to Provide COVID-19 Boosters for Eligible People. <https://kingcounty.gov/elected/executive/constantine/news/release/2021/September/27-vax-boosters-and-access-points.aspx>

8. Russillo, J. (2021). King County, With Second-Lowest COVID-19 Rate in U.S., Still Needs More Vaccines. <https://southseattleemerald.com/2021/03/05/king-county-with-second-lowest-covid-19-rate-in-u-s-still-needs-more-vaccines/>

9. Durkee, A. (2021). Seattle Is First Major U.S. City to Vaccinate 70% of Eligible Population - Here's the Cities That Could Be Next. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ali-sondurkee/2021/06/10/seattle-is-first-major-us-city-to-vaccinate-70-of-eligible-population---heres-the-cities-that-could-be-next/?sh=54d8062e5ed5>

10. King County. (2021). King County COVID Vaccine Delivery Strategy Report. <https://kingcounty.gov/-/media/depts/health/communicable-diseases/documents/C19/king-county-progress-vaccine-delivery.ashx?la=en>

11. King County. (2021, September 27). Seattle & King County expand vaccination services to provide COVID-19 boosters for eligible people - King. Seattle & King County expand vaccination services to provide COVID-19 boosters for eligible people - King County. <https://kingcounty.gov/elected/executive/constantine/news/release/2021/September/27-vax-boosters-and-access-points.aspx>

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RESOURCES

King County Unified Regional Strategy for COVID Vaccine Delivery:

<https://kingcounty.gov/~media/depts/health/communicable-diseases/documents/C19/king-county-strategy-for-vaccine-delivery.ashx?la=en>

Principles for Equitable Vaccine Delivery:

<https://kingcounty.gov/~media/depts/health/communicable-diseases/documents/C19/king-county-principles-vaccine-delivery.ashx?la=en>