



The Institute for Spirituality and Health Collaborates with Houses of Worship To Provide Vaccinations and Public Health Education

By Leah Adams and Moji Delano

The Institute for Spirituality and Health at the Texas Medical Center has re-introduced its long-treasured FaithHealth Network, a collaborative of faith communities, public health partners, and champion volunteers, who are collectively addressing the physical, spiritual, and emotional health needs of the greater Houston community.

What is The Institute for Spirituality and Health? And what is the charter of its FaithHealth Network?

The Institute for Spirituality and Health at the Texas Medical Center (The Institute or ISH) was established in 1955 as The Institute of Religion and was a founding member of the world-renowned Texas Medical Center. The mission of The Institute is to enhance well-being by exploring the relationship between spirituality and health. The Institute advances this mission by engaging in education, research, and both public and private programs. An interfaith non-profit organization, The Institute is guided by the belief that faith and meaning impact health and healing.

The Institute's FaithHealth Network was initially conceived in 2017 by Dr. Fred Smith, a pioneer in the relationship between public health and communities of faith. Smith organized a FaithHealth Summit at the Houston Graduate School of Theology where participants expressed the desire to create a sustained network whose members could meet regularly, learn from each other, and collaborate toward enhancing the health of the region.

Today's FaithHealth Network has evolved extensively under the leadership of The Institute, as it is interfaith and seeks to nurture the well-being and health of all in our region. Greater Houston's interfaith communities have a rich history of collaboration with The Institute and this network's faith and public health members are invested in partnership and focused on providing resources and education to the most at-risk among us. Faith communities often act as sources of authority and trust, particularly within populations disproportionately detached from traditional health systems. These include African American as well as non-English speaking, immigrant, and refugee communities. Each representative organization has the potential to broaden its reach and deepen its engagement by learning from others and sharing resources. The result is a softening of the burden on hospitals, healthcare workers, faith homes, and as well as families.

What resources and information are available?

Monthly FaithHealth Network meetings are held virtually via Zoom in partnership with national and local public health leaders. The following initiatives offer free resources, education, and vaccines:

- **FaithHealth Initiative on COVID Health Disparities** empowers underserved communities with free tools and support to reduce chronic stress, heal underlying traumas, and promote overall health;
- **Faith & Diabetes Initiative** trains congregational health leaders to provide diabetes and chronic disease education and prevention classes and peer support to their community members; and,
- **FaithHealth Vaccine Initiative** involves partnering with faith communities to raise awareness, foster dialogue, address challenges, and provide free pop-up vaccine sites for the flu and Covid-19.

What does a free vaccination clinic or workshop at a faith home look like?

The FaithHealth Vaccine Initiative seeks for each event to attract 40 to 50 people, ages 5 and older, in Houston's Third Ward, Fifth Ward, and Acres Homes communities. The Institute encourages churches, synagogues, temples, and any faith-based organization wishing to establish and host Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 and influenza (flu) vaccination sites to reach out. Mobile vaccination sites are staffed and supported by local health departments such as the Houston Health Department and Harris County Public Health, along with licensed medical care partners including The HOPE Clinic. Ideally, some of the approved vaccination sites will host regular or semi-permanent vaccination events to ensure these critical resources continue to reach individuals and families in these areas.

This initiative provides faith communities a wide range of options for programs and events. While some faith homes opt for town-hall style question-and-answer sessions, others have hosted panel discussions, live seminars and virtual webinars. Recently, a member organization hosted an event titled "Reflecting on COVID" in collaboration with a local faith-based art institution and featured a public health official sharing COVID statistics and the importance of addressing health inequity. The mobile vaccination clinic offers COVID-19 and flu vaccines at no cost. Vaccine recipients are NOT required to have health insurance as a condition of receiving the vaccinations for free.

To connect with free resources from the FaithHealth Vaccine Initiative or to discuss arranging a pop-up vaccine clinic, please visit <https://www.faithandvaccines.org> or contact The Institute's FaithHealth Project Coordinator, Mojisola Delano, at mdelano@ish-tmc.org or (713)797-0600 x-5.

To become a member of the FaithHealth Network, please visit <https://www.faithhealthhouston.org> or email us at faithhealth@ish-tmc.org.

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