

# Deep Dive: Perceptions about the COVID-19 Vaccine Among Vaccine-Hesitant Military-Connected Families

## May 2021 Focus Group Findings

Focus Group Dates: May 18-19, 2021



# Focus Group Composition

Participant Demographic Information				
Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Military Affiliation	Branch of Service
Focus Group 1 – Vaccine Averse				
Participant 1	35-44	Female	Retiree Spouse	Army
Participant 2	45-54	Female	Veteran Spouse	Marine Corps
Participant 3	45-54	Female	Military Spouse	Navy
Participant 4	35-44	Female	National Guard Spouse	Air National Guard
Focus Group 2 – Vaccine Deliberate				
Participant 5	Not reported	Female	Veteran Spouse	Reserves
Participant 6	55+	Female	Veteran Spouse	Army
Participant 7	35-44	Female	Veteran	Air Force
Data collected from participants via questionnaire prior to focus group participation. Six of 7 participants identify as unpaid caregivers.				

## Definitions

### Vaccine Averse:

Participant(s) who did not plan to receive the vaccine

### Vaccine Deliberate:

Participant(s) who were undecided about receiving the vaccine

### Vaccine Hesitant:

(Vaccine averse + vaccine deliberate) Participant(s) who either did not plan to receive the vaccine or were undecided



# Spotlight on Concerns

## Unanswered questions and confusing information influence participants' perceptions about vaccine effectiveness

**>50%**

of all  
sub-groups\*

report “concerns about COVID-19 vaccine effectiveness” as a reason why they have not yet received the vaccine

(April Pulse Check finding)



**2 of 3**

vaccine-averse participants say the CDC website is confusing\*\*

Participants raised questions about second doses, COVID-19 survivor antibodies, and homeopathic alternatives

(Focus group insight)

“I feel like I get bombarded with “take it, get the shot!” but not bombarded with actual statistical data. That’s really hard to find, quite frankly, at least for me. Maybe I’m looking in the wrong place.” — National Guard Spouse

\*Among all respondents regardless of vaccine status

\*\*Of those who responded to the question



# Spotlight on Concerns

Reported experiences of severe vaccine side-effects among personal acquaintances contribute to safety concerns among participants

**83%**

of spouses  
AND

**78%**

of spouses  
of veterans

report “concerns about COVID-19 vaccine safety and unknown side-effects” as a factor in their decision not to receive the vaccine

a greater proportion of women report this than men

(April Pulse Check finding)



**4 of 7**

vaccine-hesitant participants say they know someone who has been hospitalized after receiving the vaccine and believe the vaccine caused hospitalization

(Focus group insight)

“My daughter-in-law got it and had blood clots that day in her lungs, wound up in the ICU for three weeks on a ventilator, and she’s 22. So I have a lot of fears with it.” – Spouse of a Veteran



# Spotlight on Concerns

Participants want more data and research, especially on issues unique to their personal situation(s)

**32%**

of spouses  
AND

**39%**

of spouses  
of veterans\*

report “personal health reasons” as a reason they have chosen not to receive the vaccine thus far

(April Pulse Check finding)

 **5 of 7**

vaccine-hesitant participants **feel more research would make them feel more confident** in the vaccine

Participants seek studies unique to certain groups (e.g., immunocompromised, teenage and racially/ethnically diverse participants)

(Focus group insight)

“They haven’t done a lot of testing on immunocompromised people, so for us – we have a cancer patient, I have a [son who is] immunocompromised, and I have a lot of weird reactions to meds in general. Why would I put something into my body when I don’t know what’s going to happen?” – Military Spouse

\*Among unvaccinated, vaccine-hesitant respondents



# Spotlight on Motivations

The desire to protect family and loved ones is complicated for military caregivers

90%

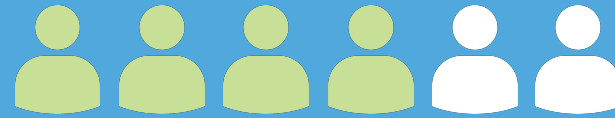
of spouses  
AND

92%

of spouses  
of veterans\*

report “to protect my family and loved ones” as a top-three reason for choosing to receive the vaccine

(April Pulse Check finding)



4 of 6

vaccine-hesitant caregivers say serving as a caregiver plays a role in their hesitancy

(Focus group insight)

“My husband also has cancer, so they are wanting him to get it because of his immune system, and of course, being a caretaker they’re wanting me to get it... I go back and forth between yes it’s a good thing and no it’s not... there’s just so much out there good and bad that it’s hard to know.” – Veteran Spouse



# Spotlight on Motivations

Hearing about vaccine choices is motivating, including the option not to vaccinate

**43%**

of spouses  
AND

**48%**

of spouses  
of veterans\*

report that the **opportunity to choose their vaccine** would increase their likelihood of receiving it

(April Pulse Check finding)



**2 of 3**

vaccine deliberate participants **say choice would make them more likely to get vaccinated**

Participants say they want their choice to vaccinate to be acknowledged

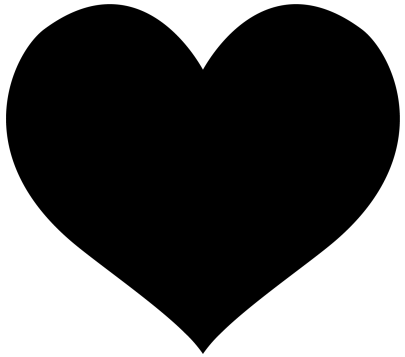
(Focus group insight)

**“Each situation is different. People choose to do it for certain reasons, and people choose not to do it for certain reasons. But stop pushing it down our throats saying you have to do it. There’s not enough to know that it’s going to do any good.”** – Veteran Spouse

\*Unvaccinated respondents without an appointment scheduled



# Recommendations for Increasing Vaccine Uptake in Military-Connected Family Members



Be Empathetic



Stay Positive



Make it Personal



Keep it Real

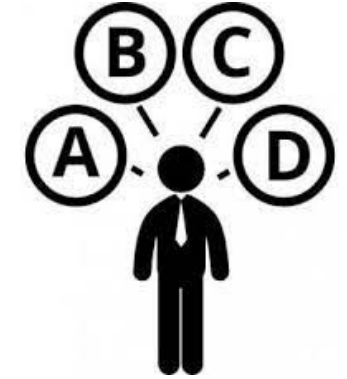


Give Doctors the Mic





# Recommendation #1: Be Empathetic



**Acknowledge the complexity of vaccine decision-making and emphasize choices**

- ✓ Participants responded positively to a “mixed vaccine” military couple whereby one partner had not received the vaccine
- ✓ Participants relate to stories that highlight the many factors military-connected families are considering in vaccine decision-making

“I value your opinion [about the vaccine], but I have my own voice as well.” – Veteran

“Since he retired, it’s the first time he doesn't have to get the vaccine ... he’s waffling because for the first time ever, he has a choice.” – Veteran Spouse



## Recommendation #2: Stay Positive

Avoid fear-based messaging and needle imagery

- ✘ 3 of 4 vaccine-averse participants dislike when fear is used to encourage vaccination
- ✘ 6 of 7 vaccine-hesitant participants respond negatively to images of needles



“I think they have made fear the main factor in pushing people to make decisions on things they shouldn't.” – Veteran Spouse



## Recommendation #3: Make it Personal

Emphasize relationship-based outreach by developing outreach scripts to unvaccinated family, friends, and colleagues

- ✓ Participants mention seeking vaccine advice from family and friends
- ✓ April Pulse Check respondents trusted messengers with a direct personal connection most



“I have several practitioner friends that they’re in the business of certain things, and I’ll ask, hey, what’s your thoughts on this? Is it reliable? Is it not?” – Veteran Spouse

“I have a friend who’s a PA, and she has a pretty natural mindset which is my mindset as well. I try to do things more naturally or homeopathically before we do any medical intervention... I tend to go to her. She’s a good friend, and she’s trusted, and she’s also medical.” – National Guard Spouse



## Recommendation #4: Keep it Real

100

Refrain from overly-scripted, formal messaging

- ✘ Participants feel unmotivated by stiff and scripted statements that often feel political
- ✘ Participants respond negatively to formal video and image backgrounds and instead suggest casual settings that don't require masks

“I think [COVID-19 messaging] is too scripted, and like you said, politically driven in order to be realistic. And the mask things just annoys me.” – Veteran Spouse

“[COVID-19 messaging] would be better if it was just him and his wife chilling, something more natural that we can relate to.” – National Guard Spouse



## Recommendation #5: Give Doctors the Mic

Feature health care providers speaking directly to unvaccinated populations' concerns

- ✓ All participants said they trust health care providers for credible information about the vaccine over federal, state, and local agencies or media outlets
- ✗ Participants distrust COVID-19 messaging from celebrities and are rarely able to identify celebrity spokespeople presented



**“If they’re going to have someone speak for the military, have doctors speak for the military.”**

– National Guard Spouse

**“I definitely don’t trust any politician or celebrity. They get paid, money in their pockets.”**

– Military Spouse



# Appendix: Focus Group Methodology

## Recruitment and Selection

- Recruited via Blue Star Families email marketing
- Offered \$50 gift card incentive for participating in the focus group
- Participants selected based on:
  - a. Likelihood to receive the vaccine (averse or deliberate)
  - b. Availability

## Interview Protocol

- Asked open-ended questions related to perceptions of COVID-19, the vaccine, messaging, and trusted sources of information
- Solicited feedback on videos and images designed to encourage military families to receive the vaccine



This Research Was Made Possible By:

**COVID** Collaborative

Craig Newn  
Philanthropy



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