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‘Peer pressure has been around forever’: Worcester is turning to social ‘influencers’ to boost vaccine rates in city’s youth

Updated: Aug. 27, 2021, 8:56 a.m. | Published: Aug. 27, 2021, 6:00 a.m.

Published: 6:00 a.m.

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Worcester turns to 'influencers' to boost youth vaccine rates in city

By [Michael Bonner](#) | mbonner@masslive.com

With her skateboard leaning against her leg, Phoebe Seguin sat in a chair in Worcester Common last week as doctors administered the 20-year-old her first dose of the [COVID-19](#) vaccine.

After the physicians placed a small bandage on her arm, a group of Seguin’s friends celebrated the moment with her.

Several health care workers drew her to the table. Each time a person walked by they shouted some form of, “Have you gotten vaccinated yet?”

Seguin had not. She hadn’t planned on receiving the vaccine at the event. She was more focused on the mobile skateboard parking on Franklin Street rather than the mobile vaccine clinic in the common.

But it wasn’t the doctors at the event who eventually convinced Seguin to get the shot.

“All my friends are vaccinated already,” Seguin said. “At first I was like, they didn’t even research it at all — a very short amount of time. But then my friends were like, whatever, you should just get it. I was like, I mean, guess people really aren’t dying from it.”

Peer pressure persuaded Seguin and it’s something the city is looking to replicate on as it tries to encourage young people to get vaccinated.

About 90% of people 65 and older are fully vaccinated in Worcester, city officials said. Only 35% of children ages 12 to 15 are fully vaccinated, the city said. The 16-to-19 age group is 38% vaccinated and 20 to 29 is at 45%.

[Studies have shown](#) when it comes to the vaccine, adults find confidence in speaking with doctors. Younger generations though [often turn to friends](#).

“Peer pressure has been around forever,” said Domenica Perrone, a project manager with Health and Humans Services in Worcester. “Let’s just use it to our advantage.”



The percentage of children 12 to 20 who are vaccinated in Worcester lags far behind other age demographics in the city. Youth influencers are trying to change that.

At the beginning of August, [the city announced prize incentives](#) for residents ages 12 to 24 who are fully vaccinated against COVID. The prizes included an SE Bicycle, courtesy of Worcester Earn-A-Bike; an iPad Air; three 43-inch, LED TVs; and two Nintendo Switches.

Beyond material objects, Worcester is turning to youth influencers and peer-to-peer communication to bolster its vaccine numbers for those under 20.

“It’s youth from Worcester, youth creatives coming together, already doing their thing for the right cause and kind of examining their ‘why story’,” Perrone said.

Perrone said the city targeted about 10 “influencers” who are active both online and in the community already. They’ll launch a photo campaign along with video PSAs in the coming weeks.

Three of them — Jayson Dominguez, Jean Herrera and Ace Mejia — organized and participated in a youth-focused block party on the common last week.



The percentage of children 12 to 20 who are vaccinated in Worcester lags far behind other age demographics in the city. Youth influencers like Ace Mejia are trying to change that.

Dominguez received his vaccine at a similar event earlier in the summer.

“Really what it was, I got peer pressured by my friend,” Dominguez said. “It really was. He was going to get vaccinated and I said, ‘Don’t do it by yourself, I’ll go with you.’”

Recently, Dominguez convinced his sister, who is 14, to get her first shot.

“I don’t think I’m going to get [COVID], but also my grandparents, my parents and [my brother] wanted me to get it because I’m starting school,” Jocelynn Orama said.

It’s similar messages Dominguez, Herrera and Mejia are pitching to their friends, family and now young residents in the city.

“We’re trying to raise awareness for people in our age group as a priority,” Herrera said. “There is a deficit there in the data. I feel like it’s way better to hear it from someone who looks like you or somebody is around your age.”

Herrera said he was “extremely hesitant” at first, but his family was filled with high-risk people. Ultimately, protecting them outweighed any fear.

“The first step in protecting my family was protecting myself and making sure I’m doing enough for them,” Herrera said. “It was saving those lives. People that I don’t know, people that I do know and people that I love.”

The percentage of children 12 to 20 who are vaccinated in Worcester lags far behind other age demographics in the city. Youth influencers like Jean Herrera are trying to change that.

As of Aug. 20, the city has administered 19,023 doses at its mobile vaccination clinics.

Mahlet Kelecha organizes the mobile vaccine clinics for UMass Memorial Health along with the city of Worcester.

She said the main driver leading parents and their children to the mobile vaccine clinics is schools reopening.

[Children represented 22% of all new cases](#) in the United States last week, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Many of those cases spread nationwide while schools remained closed for the summer.

“They know with the [delta] variant, it’s a higher risk for their kids,” Kelecha said.

Many colleges and universities are also requiring the students to be fully vaccinated before returning to campus, which is also driving young people to clinics, Kelecha said.

Children who are younger than 18, though, need their parent’s consent. Kelecha has seen children approach the mobile clinics wanting the vaccine, but their parents refuse.

“It’s more about showing the parents the dangers of what the kids are going to encounter and going back to normal. What does that like for the kids?” Kelecha said. “When you talk to parents about going back to normal for their kids, they don’t have to be at home all the time, it gives freedom for both the kids and the parents.”

Christopher Zaro, a first-year medical student at UMass Medical School, carried that message last week at Worcester Common.

Zaro and a team from UMass shouted to as many teens and adults as they could, asking about their vaccination status.

Many provided a thumbs up to signal they had received the shots. Others said they hadn't. That's when the work began.

"It's really just going out and talking to people and asking them if they'd had it," Zaro said. "For a lot of kids, it's a matter of convenience. Kids aren't able to drive. It's harder to access."

Zaro knows there are young adults like Seguin who attended the block party or a [WooSox](#) game or even returned a book at the library, not expecting to get the vaccine, but a conversation led to another shot in the arm.

In Seguin's case, her friends' voices spoke louder than Zaro's.

He didn't care. Seeing one more vaccine brought a smile behind Zaro's masked face.

"Like anything else, people are social," Zaro said. "If they see from social groups that this is a normal thing to do, I think it will really help people work through those fears and hesitancy."

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