

# Social Workers: The Key to Connecting Older Adults to the End of COVID-19

By Stephanie Guyre, LMSW, Connect to End COVID-19 Ambassador

The Federal Public Health Emergency has been officially over for almost a year. Infection rates are currently down, hospitalization rates continue to decrease, but the threat of COVID-19 infection remains. Older adults, specifically Americans over the age of 60 with chronic health conditions, are still at increased risk of COVID-19 infection and lasting health complications after infection. Vaccination rates among the aging population tend to be significantly lower than rates among the general population.

When addressing the big question of how to get the aging population vaccinated, there are two major subpopulations to consider: those in an institutional setting and those who are aging in place. According to the [CDC](#), a whopping 29% of Medicare beneficiaries aged 65 and older have received the COVID vaccine. This is consistent with the current rate of fully vaccinated nursing home residents. This sounds like a positive statistic, but the rate of fully vaccinated nursing home residents has dropped from an all-time high of 43% at the end of March 2024, to the current 29%.

## Vaccines as Preventative Care

At this point in the pandemic, vaccines have shifted from emergent precautions to routine preventative care. According to the [National Center for Biotechnology Information \(NCBI\)](#), only 33% of women and 40% of men aged 65 and up have received all recommended preventative services (screenings, vaccinations, etc). Older adults face many barriers to medical care--transportation, mobility challenges, and cognitive impairment are just the tip of that particular iceberg. In order for any public health initiative targeting the aging population to be effective, it must meet nuanced expectations of accessibility. The CDC's published [Guidance for Vaccinating Older Adults and People with Disabilities](#) outlines ways to overcome the challenge of accessibility.

One particular accessibility tool that is often overlooked is the family caregiver. For so many aging adults, their family caregiver is the gatekeeper to health--providing information, scheduling appointments, and serving as a partner in activities of daily living. Vaccine initiatives may be better served by targeting their outreach to these family caregivers in an effort to increase access for aging individuals who are dependent on others for their healthcare.

## Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Ultimate Barrier

The public perception seems to be that “COVID is over.” It's no longer a daily, hourly headline, and complacency has set in. This lack of urgency may yet be the biggest barrier to vaccinating older adults. [The National Council on Aging](#) urges us to continue treating COVID-19 as a public health priority. Executive director of the American Public Health Association Dr. Georges Benjamin affirms that,

“At the end of the day, it's complacency. These are not people who are opposed to getting the shot; they just hadn't gotten around to getting it done.”

Following updated guidelines and receiving recommended doses continues to be the best defense against COVID-19.

## This is Where Social Workers Come In

Social Workers have a very specialized role in the medical care of the aging person. We are the translator of medical jargon, the advocate of informed consent, and the cheerleader of accessible services. We are the link between self-determination and a physician's advice. We embrace our duty to advocate, educate, and encourage.

To that end, NASW, in partnership with the CDC and the University of Texas School of Social Work, has developed a comprehensive program to support social workers in their work. [The Connect to End COVID-19](#) initiative offers a wealth of resources and information for us to utilize in the fight to overcome vaccine hesitancy and increase uptake rates among the elderly and other special populations, each of which has their own legitimate fears and concerns.

It will take all our knowledge, skills, and resources to beat COVID. Remember, Social Workers: we are the connection.



Join NASW's national Connect to End COVID-19 effort, a CDC-funded initiative to support social workers and their clients in informed vaccine decision-making. Complimentary webinars and CEUs available.