



THE COVID-19 VACCINE: thoughts from the team at Restore Justice

Formerly Incarcerated Men Share Why They're Getting Vaccinated

Fred Weatherspon received his second and final dose of the COVID-19 in January. "I want to protect myself," Fred said. "I knew, if given the opportunity, I would take it."

Fred didn't experience the side effects some people do. "I was completely healthy, completely fine," he explained.

After serving 25 years in prison for a youthful conviction, Fred returned home in 2017 and works as a violence prevention mentor for teenagers. He wants to speak directly to the incarcerated people he grew up with. "If you want to preserve yourself and those around you, and if you want to be healthy, take it," he explained. "Trust the experts."

The virus has killed friends of Fred's who were still incarcerated. "The results of COVID are obvious. Trust what you see around you. This is a no-brainer. What is the alternative to not taking the shot?" he asked.

Renaldo Hudson returned home in 2020 and works for the Illinois Prison Project. He also received both vaccine doses. "It feels really, really comforting to feel that I am protected," Renaldo said.

He had very few side effects, just a slight headache and soreness for a few days at the injection site in his arm.

"I would encourage others to take the vaccine to protect themselves, as well as family and loved ones, and the community at large," Renaldo said. "You should have some shield of protection. That's your right."

"Please consider with a sober mind to take the shot that will potentially help your immune system to protect itself against the killer called COVID-19," he added. "Right now the only thing protecting you really is being vaccinated."

In encouraging people to get vaccinated, Renaldo pointed to the high case and death rates among communities of color. "COVID-19 is really taking a toll on the African-American community, as well as the Latino community. I was astonished at how many people of color are walking through the cemetery."

About the Vaccines

So far, there are two approved vaccines in the United States, one manufactured by Pfizer and one by Moderna. (Johnson & Johnson is seeking authorization for their vaccine.) In trials, both vaccines have so far prevented 100 percent of COVID-19 deaths. Pfizer prevented any symptoms in 95 percent of people (meaning they didn't even feel sick), and Moderna prevented symptoms in 94 percent of people. These are wonderful, reassuring numbers!

To get approved, a vaccine must meet intense safety requirements and undergo safety trials with thousands of participants. Vaccines are reviewed by the National Academy of Sciences, the National Institutes for Health, and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Once the FDA approves a vaccine, every batch is tested to make sure it meets safety standards.

The COVID-19 vaccines are designed to teach the body to identify and fight off the COVID-19 virus. They don't actually contain the live virus itself. After receiving the vaccine, you may have symptoms, such as a fever, but this is normal. Symptoms "are a sign that the body is building protection against the virus that causes COVID-19," the CDC explains.

Houston Methodist Hospital put together a nice summary of exactly how the vaccine works. Here's what they say:

1. "Through a COVID-19 mRNA vaccine, you receive pieces of mRNA*, harmless genetic material used to create proteins.
2. Your body uses mRNA to manufacture a version of the spike protein found on the COVID-19 virus.
3. The newly created spike protein triggers an immune response - teaching your body to recognize and respond to the virus in a variety of ways.
4. If you are exposed to the virus in the future, your immune system will quickly recognize the spike protein and begin destroying the virus (i.e., you may never feel sick)."

(*mRNA is separate from DNA. It's a compound found in all cells.)

Getting the Vaccine

Illinois is one of a small handful of states that will soon start vaccinating people in prison. Restore Justice is grateful for this decision, because we know people in prison are more likely to contract the virus. We also know the virus that causes COVID-19 isn't going anywhere. It's still moving around our state. As long as people have to go in and out of prisons, the virus can enter. That's why vaccines are so important. They are the key to preventing people from getting sick and dying.

It's because of all these factors that Nelson Morris is going to get the vaccine as soon as he's able. Nelson served 29 years and three weeks in the Illinois Department of Corrections. He came home in August of 2020. Nelson now works for Restore Justice.

"I am getting the vaccine because I believe it is a major step to ending COVID," Nelson said. "People incarcerated should get the vaccine because it is impossible to practice

social distancing, and you have zero control over your surroundings and how it is cleaned.”

Irene Soble is a nurse who volunteers with the Illinois Prison Project. She received both vaccine doses (one in December and one in January). “I had no side effects after the first injection. After the second injection, I did have a sore arm, fatigue, and body aches for two days. Everything was manageable,” Irene said.

Before getting the vaccine, Irene researched the vaccination program herself to make sure there were no shortcuts that could jeopardize patients. “After reviewing information from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), FDA, and state health websites, I was satisfied with the process used to assure safety,” she said. “I believe in science and medicine. I believe the vaccine is the best and fastest way out of our current living situation.”

Our Best Tool to Fight the Virus

Irene also noted, “Incarcerated people have few tools to combat this virus. Social distancing is impossible for most; masks are not readily available. Ventilation systems in most prisons are inadequate. Incarcerated people have suboptimal health care, nutrition, and exercise. They do have a choice to take or not take the vaccine. I would encourage any eligible people to take the vaccine as a way to exercise some control over their health.”

Jobi Cates, executive director of Restore Justice, agrees. “One of the scariest things about COVID-19 is that it is brand-new to human immune systems, which means we just cannot fight it off the way we naturally fight off other viruses. That is why it has really shut down our communities. Once a large enough number of people are vaccinated, I hope we can start visiting one another again and getting back to normal,” Jobi said.