



**“Shot of Truth: Communicating Trusted Vaccine Information”**

**U.S. Senate Commerce Committee  
Subcommittee on Communications, Media, and  
Broadband**

**April 15, 2021**

**Statement of The Honorable Gordon H. Smith**

**President and CEO  
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## Introduction

Good morning Chairman Luján, Ranking Member Thune and members of the subcommittee. My name is Gordon Smith and I am the president and CEO of the National Association of Broadcasters. I am honored today to testify on behalf of our 7,200 free, local television and radio station members and the broadcast networks that bring the most trusted news and information to our communities each and every day. This critical role has been especially vital to the public during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Survey after survey shows that in times of emergency, Americans turn to their local broadcasters first for the most trusted and reliable information to stay safe and informed. Unlike other communications mediums, broadcasters' guiding principle is to serve on the front lines of every crisis, staying on the air to provide critical information even when their own lives are in danger. This service is how we earn our broadcast licenses and fulfill a mission that no other medium can, and that has been especially vital during the past year.

Just over a year ago, all our lives were turned upside down by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the country shut down and many Americans worked from home, broadcasters scrambled to set up makeshift studios and modify camera and microphone equipment so they could continue reporting breaking news and sharing vital information with their communities while trying to stay safe.

Despite facing major economic and physical challenges created by the pandemic, local broadcasters stepped up to provide their communities with accurate and timely information on COVID-19 on every platform – on air, online and through social media. Broadcasters led educational efforts to help prevent the spread of the virus and provided resources and help to those impacted, donating hundreds of millions of dollars in free airtime to preventative education in the first six months alone of the pandemic.

In addition to providing local news and updates vital to their communities, broadcasters worked to raise awareness of mental health resources, supported and

promoted local businesses and frontline workers and shared positive stories about people helping their neighbors in need.

Now, as hope abounds and vaccines roll out across the nation, broadcasters are once again leading the way in serving the public. Stations are serving as critical partners to government agencies and the public health and medical communities to arm listeners and viewers with timely, accurate information about vaccines. We are helping Americans protect themselves and others by getting inoculated, and helping our nation reopen and return to normalcy – something we all desperately crave.

### Identifying Effective Messaging and Messengers

Broadcasters' vaccine education efforts have been comprehensive and fortified by in-depth research. In the fall of last year, NAB partnered with the Reynolds Journalism Institute on a nationwide research project<sup>1</sup> to identify effective vaccine education messaging that would best resonate with Americans. What we found helped guide our efforts to prepare our nation's journalists for the critical mission of helping our country emerge from the pandemic.

Our research yielded encouraging news and found a public eager for the vaccine. In fact, six in 10 respondents wanted a shot as soon as it was available to them, with only 13% saying they would *not* get vaccinated. I'm pleased to report that the number of Americans who want to be vaccinated has continued to rise as more information has become available.

However, our research findings also helped us identify challenges to vaccine acceptance. Our data, in addition to research conducted by numerous groups, indicates greater hesitancy among certain demographics, such as African Americans, Hispanics, conservative-leaning Whites, and women aged 18-34. Identifying this early helped us to prepare our stations that reach these critical demographics and arm them with

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<sup>1</sup> Research survey conducted by SmithGeiger of 3,046 adults aged 18-64, December 4-11, 2020

information to help them deliver effective messages specifically tailored to these audiences.

We found that the biggest motivating factor in getting a vaccine is the desire to get back to normal, as well as to protect vulnerable friends and family members. However, Americans want to know that the vaccines are safe and effective. Our research shows that they simply want the facts – news stories that make recommendations based on detailed reporting, not a personal perspective. Fortunately, that is what broadcasters do best – they dig deep to provide accurate information to their communities – not spin, rumors or political theater.

Our research also deemed local news the most reliable and trustworthy information source by our survey respondents. Social media was ranked least reliable by Americans. Our data demonstrates that the public values a trusted local source over personalities, politicians and pundits, and the most trusted voices are those of their local doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

This research made it clear from the outset that a local and regional approach would be more effective than a one-size-fits-all national message.

These research findings became the basis of NAB's vaccine education toolkit, [nab.org/vaccine](http://nab.org/vaccine), that was produced as a comprehensive resource for our member stations and other local journalists. This online resource provides messaging guidance, access to local and national healthcare experts and public service tools to help stations craft news stories and campaigns that best resonate with their listeners and viewers.

The vaccine education toolkit also includes resources and research provided by many well-respected partners, such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Kaiser Family Foundation, Asian Americans Advancing Justice, the Hispanic Federation, National Urban League, Trust for America's Health and countless others.

These partnerships are critical to our work in reaching vulnerable populations with information that is accurate and impactful. Most recently, we added the great work of the Ad Council to our toolkit and encouraged our radio and television station

members to utilize the “It’s Up to You” campaign resources, which encourage the public to get the latest vaccine information, understanding that personal education is the first step in building vaccine confidence.

### Partners in Public Education

Armed with the research and messaging to best educate the public, and routinely cited by Americans as the most trusted news source, broadcasters are uniquely positioned to effectively deliver vaccine information to their communities.

With the highest reach of all media platforms into more than 90% of households, and a service that is ubiquitous and free to the public, broadcast radio and TV stations are clearly the best message carriers to reach vulnerable populations. Local stations serve communities of color, multilingual ethnic minorities and rural areas of the country where vaccine hesitancy is highest.

In fact, African American, Hispanic and Latino, Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities rely on free and local TV and radio broadcast stations more than the general U.S. population. According to Nielsen, the number of broadcast-only households in the United States continues to rise, increasing nearly 14% from 2019 to 2020. More than one-third of minority households in the country rely on a television antenna to get free, over the air TV. At least 40% of African American households and 44% of Hispanic households in the U.S. own a TV antenna.<sup>2</sup>

Acknowledging this vast, unique and unparalleled reach, we appreciate the many senators and members of Congress that have worked over the past year to support broadcasters, providing robust relief and funding, and urging the administration to utilize local stations to educate Americans during the pandemic. We are gratified that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has identified local broadcast stations as effective advertising partners and conduits to share clear, reliable information with those demographics and regions that need it the most through their

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<sup>2</sup> Horowitz Research, “[State of OTA](#)”, October 2020

vaccine education advertising campaign. We look forward to continuing to work closely with HHS on these efforts to reach those most at risk.

Additionally, NAB is proud to be a founding member of the Administration's recently announced Community Corps, whose mission is to galvanize trusted messengers in local communities to encourage people to get vaccinated. The program, spearheaded by HHS and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is working with broadcasters to deliver messages to the public in the fight against COVID-19 and share the importance of vaccinations in every community.

We also look forward to the role broadcasters can play in the Administration's forthcoming "You Can Do It," campaign to encourage Americans – particularly those in rural communities, young adults, African Americans and Hispanics, to get vaccinated. Broadcasters are particularly well situated to boost vaccine confidence among these populations and help them make the critical decision to be vaccinated.

Finally, NAB is active in several private sector campaigns to supplement our work with the federal government. We are supporting the Greater Than COVID initiative called "The Conversation: Between Us. About Us." This campaign includes prominent Black doctors, nurses and researchers dispelling misinformation and providing accessible facts about COVID-19 vaccines for the Black community. NAB is also a member of the COVID Collaborative, a national assembly of experts and organizations working on unified action against the COVID-19 pandemic. I am honored to serve on its National Advisory Council in their efforts to ensure that we reach vulnerable communities to defeat the virus both equitably and effectively.

### Broadcasters in Action

Since the early days of the pandemic, broadcasters have donated unprecedented airtime to keeping their listeners and viewers safe and informed – from airing public service announcements to hosting fundraisers for the community to giving free promotion to small businesses. Stations continue to host townhall meetings with medical experts and post easy-to-access information on their websites, providing a

platform for the public to get answers to their vaccine questions. Not only are broadcasters working to educate the public, they are focused on addressing the mistrust that exists and acknowledge the concern among vulnerable communities.

For example, last month Gray Television's WSFA in Alabama hosted a live townhall titled, "Fear, Facts, Future: The COVID-19 Vaccine Explained," to discuss concerns and misconceptions about the COVID-19 vaccine in the Black community. The station teamed up with health experts and community leaders to answer questions and address skepticism. The panel discussion took place in Tuskegee, the site of a 1932 medical study where the government examined the effect of syphilis on Black men. This location was chosen specifically to acknowledge that the community has a reason for mistrust, but also to allow medical experts from the Black community to explain how those issues are being addressed with solid, reliable information.

Univision Communications launched a national bilingual vaccine hotline as part of its Unidos Por Los Nuestrros (United For Each Other) COVID-19 campaign, which the public can call to access accurate information about the vaccine and receive personalized assistance on how to sign up for the vaccine. They also provide an online vaccine finder and are hosting a statewide forum in California featuring Sen. Alex Padilla and Rep. Tony Cardenas to help address some of the issues surrounding vaccine disparities.

In addition to covering COVID-related educational topics on 850 local radio stations with an array of health experts, government leaders and nonprofit organizations, iHeartMedia recently launched the "COVID-19 Immunity in Our Community" podcast series, produced in partnership with HHS to share timely and accurate information about vaccines. Designed to separate fact from fiction, "COVID-19 Immunity in Our Community" will arm listeners with the tools they need to make educated decisions about getting vaccinated. The show is hosted by ABC News' Robin Roberts and features experts such as Dr. Anthony Fauci and other respected voices from the medical and scientific communities. The new podcast will also draw perspectives from Americans across different communities, who will share their unique and personal experience with vaccination.

Tegna's WXIA Atlanta took an innovative approach to addressing concerns and mistrust over COVID-19 vaccines by handing over the microphone and camera to a skeptical area mom, allowing her to interview the experts and get her questions answered. This novel and transparent approach gave the audience a voice in a minority community with high levels of hesitancy. The interviews aired during the morning and evening newscasts, as well as during a special half-hour news report.

Hearst Television's KOAT Action 7 news in Albuquerque is educating viewers about how to sign up for vaccine appointments online or by phone, informing them about who is eligible to receive a shot and answering important questions and dispelling myths about vaccine safety. They are also providing localized information about how many in the state are already vaccinated and how that compares with the rest of the country.

Celebrities such as Whoopi Goldberg on ABC's The View and trusted local anchors such as Tom Wills, a veteran reporter for Graham Media's WJXT in Jacksonville, Florida, are sharing their vaccination stories with viewers and encouraging viewers to get inoculated.

Audacy's KCBS Radio in San Francisco recently tackled questions about vaccine efficacy during its "Ask an Expert" segment, responding to listener concerns about the differences between the types of vaccines available.

Fox-owned Q13 News in Seattle is putting experts on the air, including Dr. Scott Lindquist, Washington State's epidemiologist, to talk about travel restrictions as vaccinations continue and Dr. John Dunn of Kaiser Permanente to discuss new trials for a vaccine to combat the South African COVID variant.

These are just a handful of examples of the work being done throughout the country by thousands of radio and television stations as the public turns to broadcasters to get trusted answers to their vaccine questions.



## Conclusion

It has been more than a year since the beginning of this devastating pandemic, and the enduring value of local broadcasters to our communities and your constituents has never been clearer. They have helped keep the fabric of our communities – and the very fabric of our democracy – connected during one of the most challenging years in our nation’s history. In fact, local broadcasters have been a constant companion shining light, spreading hope and supporting communities as Americans have experienced acute isolation from their families, neighbors and loved ones.

According to Nielsen, at home news consumption grew significantly in the second quarter of last year and news was the most popular TV genre viewed as Americans left their TV sets on throughout the day. The most popular source was local television among 64% of respondents, as viewers tuned into local stations to get the information most relevant to their community and the content they trust.<sup>3</sup>

A separate Nielsen survey yielded compelling findings about radio as “comfort food” during the pandemic, with 83% of Americans reaffirming that they were listening to as much or more radio as they were before the pandemic. “As is the case with local TV viewership in times of crisis, radio and on-air personalities present a connection to the real world that listeners gravitate toward and trust,” said Nielsen.<sup>4</sup>

Providing a lifeline to communities – particularly in times of crisis – is what broadcasters do best, and they do it better than all other mediums combined.

As Americans’ most-trusted source for news, local radio and television stations understand their responsibility to deliver reliable, fact-based journalism and have demonstrated their indelible value. Broadcasters are delivering life-saving information and hope during a time when fear, uncertainty and loss have bonded us.

Broadcasters stand ready and prepared to continue helping Americans get the information they need to safeguard their health and return to normalcy. We are eager to

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<sup>3</sup> The Nielsen Total Audience Report: August 2020

<sup>4</sup>Nielsen: Radio is Comfort Food as Media Consumption Rises Amid Covid-19 Pandemic

continue to assist Congress, the Administration, federal agencies and local leaders by using our free, local airwaves to carry the message America needs -- and trusts -- to get over the finish line with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss this issue, which is critical to America's broadcasters and the communities we serve. I look forward to your questions.