

JHF supports preventing HPV-related cancer across Pittsburgh region

JEWISH HEALTHCARE FOUNDATION

Each day in doctors' offices across the Pittsburgh region, there are missed opportunities to prevent cancer with just a pinch. The HPV vaccine is approved for boys ages 9–21 and girls ages 9–26, is covered by insurance or the federal Vaccines for Children program, and can reduce the risk of developing HPV-related cervical, vaginal, vulvar, anal, throat and penile cancers by up to 99 percent. The American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Family Physicians and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention all strongly endorse the vaccine.

Yet, the majority of kids and young adults locally and nationally don't receive this potentially life-saving shot. That startling fact compelled the Jewish Healthcare Foundation (JHF) in 2014 to launch the HPV Vaccination Initiative, a cancer prevention campaign that is engaging providers, parents, faith-based and community organizations, schools and government, among other groups. This outreach initiative is a project of JHF, with additional funding provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Health; The Grable Foundation; and the Eye & Ear Foundation of Pittsburgh.

A strong provider recommendation of the HPV vaccine could make all the difference. Recent studies in the American Journal of Public Health

and Vaccine, for example, indicate that when providers recommend the vaccine to parents, children are four to five times more likely to be vaccinated compared to those who don't receive a recommendation.

JHF, now equipped with neighborhood-specific HPV vaccination data and insights from providers, is partnering with practices in low-vaccination areas to shield more youth from HPV-related cancer.

JHF compiled HPV vaccination data from three health insurers (Gateway, Highmark and UPMC) on teens in the Pittsburgh metropolitan statistical area. The conclusion? We've got work to do. HPV vaccination rates in Pittsburgh are unacceptably low. Overall, just 50 percent of girls between the age of 14 and 17 have received at least one dose of the HPV vaccine, and 25 percent have received the recommended three doses. Among boys age 14-17, only 37 percent have received one dose and 17 percent have completed the three-dose regimen.

HPV vaccination rates vary significantly in Allegheny County, with as few as 28 percent of boys who are covered by a health plan receiving at least one dose of the vaccine in some communities, and as high as 55 percent in others. For girls, vaccination rates range from 44 percent to 68 percent depending on the neighborhood. JHF has identified five target communities where it will focus its outreach efforts in the months to come: Gibsonia, McKees Rocks, McKeesport/West Mifflin, Oak-

The more we can normalize the HPV vaccine ... the better off our community will be.

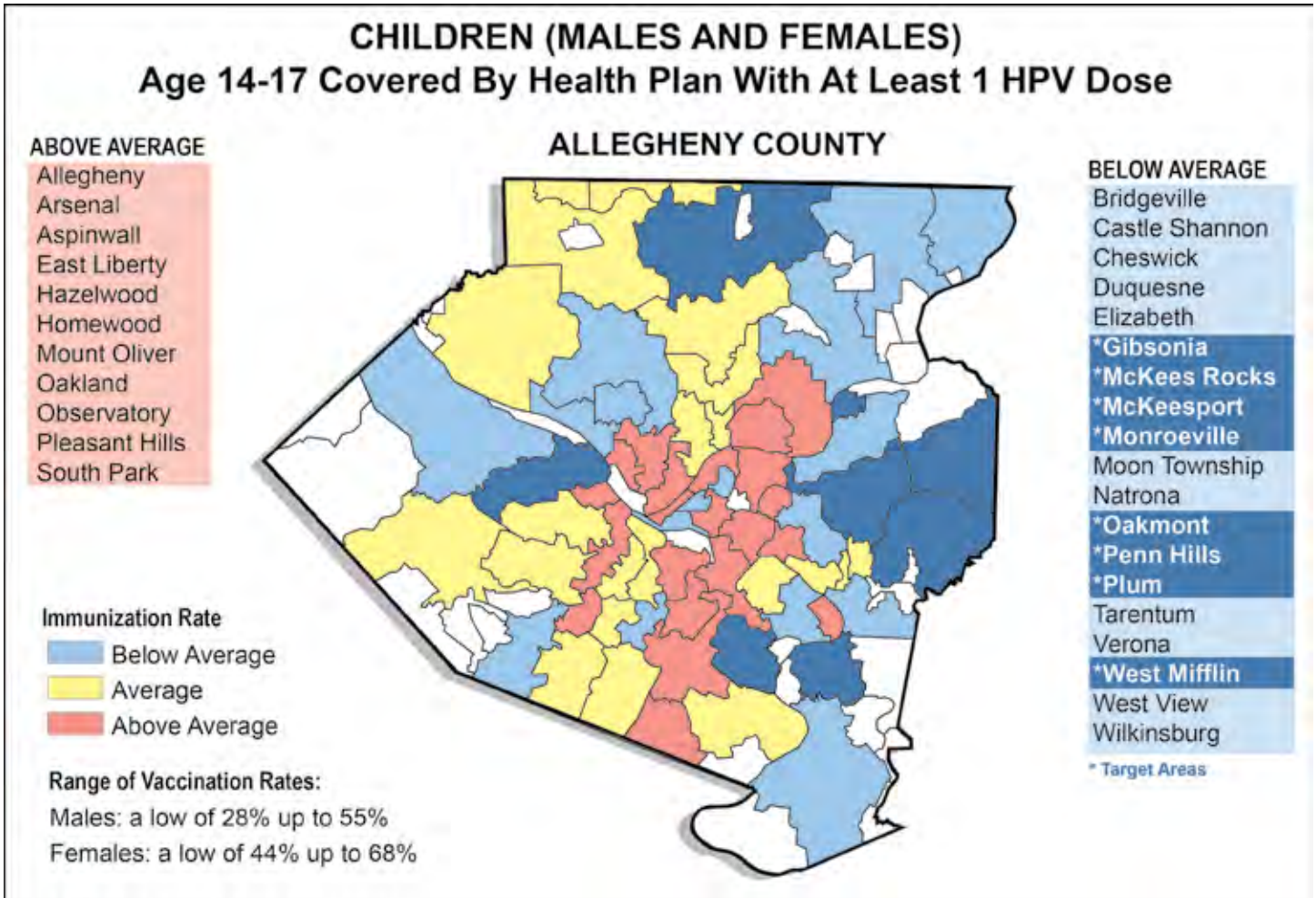
***-Karen Hacker, MD, MPH
ACHD director***

mont and Penn Hills/Plum/Monroeville.

Providers on the Foundation's HPV vaccination advisory committee offered crucial feedback on why rates might remain so low. Their chief concern: Many parents do not have much knowledge about the vaccine before their child's office visit. It's difficult for time-challenged providers to inform parents about the vaccine, receive approval and initiate the vaccine series all in one visit.

To better support providers, JHF has developed a card that will be handed out to parents at practices upon check-in that answers key questions about the effectiveness, safety and immunization schedule of the vaccine. The card is customized for each high-priority neighborhood. Parents in Gibsonia, for example, learn that only two in five kids in their area are protected against HPV.

The card also features a cancer prevention plan – a perforated, tear-off section that provides parents with action steps. Parents can indicate whether they would like to start the HPV vaccine series for their child during that day's visit, discuss vaccination in greater detail with their child's provider, or wait to begin the vaccine series. The last option stresses that the longer that



Source: Highmark, UPMC, Gateway

parents wait, the greater the chance that their child is exposed to HPV and the host of cancers that the virus could potentially cause.

"This kind of pre-visit education primes parents to discuss HPV vaccination, and be more receptive to a recommendation from the doctor," says Alan Finkelstein, MD, a family physician and faculty member at the UPMC-Shadyside Family Medicine Residency Program who also is a member of JHF's vaccination advisory committee. "Getting practices attuned to making a strong recommendation, and offering parents timely and accurate information that stimulates conversation, will start to move the

needle on HPV vaccination."

The card is just one way that the Foundation and its community partners are reaching out to practices in low-vaccination neighborhoods. JHF also is ready to offer staff training, quality improvement assistance and guided talking points for providers to parents on HPV vaccination.

The manner in which providers discuss the HPV vaccine is key, notes Allegheny County Health Department Director Karen Hacker, MD, MPH, a member of JHF's vaccination advisory board and a primary care physician. It's important for providers to treat the HPV vaccine just like other immunizations that are designed to stave off future

potential health issues.

"If it's introduced as a vaccine to prevent a sexually transmitted disease, then the providers get into a discussion that they may not be comfortable with," Dr. Hacker says. "But if providers introduce it as a vaccine to prevent cancer that may be sexually transmitted, and stress that it's more effective to get vaccinated prior to someone becoming sexually active, it's a more productive conversation.

"The more we can normalize the HPV vaccine and focus on the fact that this is the only vaccine available that can prevent certain cancers," Dr. Hacker says, "the better off our community will be."