



SOMOS COVID-19 Vaccination Efforts in NYC

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By Mario J. Paredes

A UNIQUE NETWORK of community-based doctors serving the most vulnerable minority communities in New York City will play what New York Bill de Blasio termed “a big role” in implementing New York State’s COVID-19 Vaccination Program.

SOMOS Community Care—what the Mayor called “an amazing network of community health providers”—is a network of more than 2,500 physicians, most of them primary care providers, caring for vulnerable African American, Hispanic and Chinese American Medicaid patients throughout the city.

With about a million patients, SOMOS doctors feel confident that they can immunize their entire patient body in the coming month. As family doctors, they have a close relationship with their patients and, in many cases, they speak the same language and share the same cultural background as the people in their care.

Thus, SOMOS doctors can ensure the safe equitable distribution of the vaccine in communities of color. Members of these communities have contracted and died from the virus in disproportionate numbers compared to whites. This is due to a greater prevalence of pre-existing conditions, crowded living conditions, and other key factors.

More than 400 SOMOS providers have already received the *Moderna* vaccine and are gearing up to vaccinate first responders and, subsequently, working out of their practices, New Yorkers 75 and older, the population most at risk of the coronavirus.

Mayor de Blasio announced January 8th that SOMOS doctors will vaccinate first responders at Taft High School in the Bronx, George Wingate High School in Brooklyn, and Brandeis High School in Manhattan.

The engagement of SOMOS doctors to administer the vaccine—to balance hospital-based distribution—is the fruit of lobbying efforts by SOMOS Chairman & Founder Dr. Ramon Tallaj and SOMOS President Henry Chen, whom Mayor de Blasio thanked as “two great leaders.”

Dr. Tallaj had been appointed to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo’s Clinical Advisory Task Force and the Vaccine Distribution and Implementation Task Force in Anticipation of Potential Federal Authorization of COVID-19 this Fall. The task forces are overseeing the execution of New York State’s COVID-19 Vaccination Program. SOMOS also plays a role on the Vaccine Equity Task Force.

One of the “guiding principles” of the Program already hinted at a significant role for the SOMOS network of community doctors and the SOMOS neighborhood publicity apparatus, once the vaccine would be available. The Program reads: “New York State recognizes that coordination with local organizations and community providers is essential to the safe and successful distribution and administration of COVID-19 vaccines.

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The state’s outreach efforts will especially focus on reaching underserved, hard to reach, vulnerable, less accessible and vaccine hesitant populations, as well as those at highest risk for COVID-19 infection and poor outcomes.”

For SOMOS, participation in the COVID-19 vaccination campaign is a continuation of the organization’s battle against the pandemic from the very beginning. SOMOS played what the Mayor called a “crucial role” in testing for the virus, beginning in March at the New York Stock Exchange and continuing in the summer and throughout the fall last year.

The organization operated more than 60 tri-lingual sites, with service in Spanish, English, and Chinese, based mostly at Catholic and Protestant churches throughout New York City, where SOMOS, to-date, has administered more than 500,000 coronavirus tests. The count at sites in Texas, Florida and Georgia bring the total up to 1 million. SOMOS is also testing at more than 400 public schools in the city.

Since June 2020, SOMOS has also distributed more than 5 million meals in minority neighborhoods in New York City, aiding victims of the social pandemic and those left destitute by unemployment. SOMOS has also paid for funerals of pandemic victims and supported small businesses to get back on their feet.

SOMOS was on the frontlines from the start and paid in treasure (some \$20M) and blood—a dozen SOMOS doctors died from the virus and many fell ill doing their jobs. Meanwhile, 600 of the 800 SOMOS practices remain closed.

SOMOS has proven its effectiveness and earned its stripes. No doubt, SOMOS record in the battle against the coronavirus helped persuade New York State health authorities to give our doctors the privileged task of administering the vaccine.

Next up will be giving the vaccine to more SOMOS doctors and their key staff. The fight will continue until the virus is defeated—and SOMOS is in it for the long haul.

Mario J. Paredes is CEO of SOMOS Community Care.

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