

**Many Minnesotans have stopped seeking a COVID vaccine. Now, with expanded mobile outreach, the vaccine is seeking them.**

Metro Transit has equipped a mini-fleet of six buses to bring the COVID vaccine to shopping centers, events, farms, and more. Vaccination rates have started to jump among some Minnesota communities.

About 10 people sat quietly in the cafeteria of the McDonough Community Center, in Saint Paul's North End, on a recent hot and sunny Thursday afternoon. Sitting socially distant and with masks on, they'd come here to get a second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Across the street from the community center sat an idling bus, with a banner ad on the side depicting Rosie the Riveter—though wearing a baseball hat, a mask, and a bandage on her arm. The bus had brought everything needed to make the vaccination drive possible: vaccines, supplies, and the volunteer nurses needed to give the shots.

James Yang, a 20-year Metro Transit veteran, drove the bus to the community center from the East Metro garage, just a mile or two south. Yang works as an extra board driver: that is, a driver who accepts random assignments to drive different bus routes in the system.

“Without me, this bus wouldn't go anywhere,” Yang said. Born in Laos, he moved to the U.S. with his family in 1980 when he was 10. They settled first in Selma, Alabama, before moving to live near family in Minnesota.

Before becoming a Metro Transit driver, Yang worked at a machine shop. One day, his dad mentioned that Metro Transit was hiring, so he decided to give it a shot. Yang got the job.

“I remember being scared of driving such a large vehicle,” Yang said. “They reassured me that I will do great and I would like the job. Twenty-two years later and they were right. I am still here and loving it.”

Yang is one of several drivers within Metro Transit certified to drive the agency's six vaccine buses. The vaccine bus idea originated from a partnership between Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota, Metro Transit, and the Minnesota Department of Health. It's designed to get vaccines to people who otherwise would not go out of their way to seek one out.

Normally, health workers would administer the vaccine onboard the bus itself. But the team on this day decided to set up the vaccination clinic at the community center, so patients could wait inside in an air-conditioned environment.

The inside of the community center is lined in concrete brick with accents of blue—a 1980s look. The halls appeared most empty, except for tables stacked with brochures. The room across the hall, where patients waited, felt a little warmer and brighter.

### **Vaccination rates catching up for some groups**

Minnesota is actually doing quite well with COVID-19 vaccinations compared with the rest of the nation. In June, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found only 7 percent of Minnesotans hesitate to get the vaccine. And since late May, the state has been trying to incentivize vaccinations with perks like free event admissions and fishing licenses.

Asian Minnesotans are being vaccinated at the highest rates in Minnesota, although a study from the Coalition of Asian American Leaders and the Hmong Public Health Association found Hmong, Karen, and Karenni people died from COVID-19 at rates far greater than white Minnesotans.

While vaccinations among Black, Hispanic, and Native American populations continue to lag behind the rates for Asian and white Minnesotans, they're starting to catch up. The Minnesota Department of Health reported vaccination rates are increasing the greatest in recent weeks among those who identify as Black/African American or Hispanic. For the week ending July 2, the Minnesota Department of Health reported a 2.6 percent increase among Black/African American people, and a 2.2 percent increase among people who identify as Hispanic. The department of health thinks community outreach efforts, such as using the vaccine buses, are helping.

Cathy Rucci, who is the Executive Director of MORE, a St. Paul-based organization that helps integrate immigrants and refugees into the community, points to a handful of factors that make it hard for working people of color to access the vaccine. These include transportation challenges, demanding work schedules, and access to childcare. To overcome these barriers, MORE partnered with the Minnesota Department of Health to bring the vaccines into the community by bus.

Karen Gardinier, who works as an executive at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota, volunteered to oversee Thursday's clinic. She explained that she wanted to help people in hard-to-reach communities find their way to the vaccine.

“It’s nice to be able to come somewhere where the community has coordinated to do outreach and then we work with them to be able to bring the bus to them and get them vaccinated,” Gardiner said.

### **Driving vaccines to apartment complexes, shopping centers, farms**

As vaccinations have slowed to a trickle at pharmacies and mass vaccination centers, the vaccine bus has picked up its pace. On some days, it has visited apartment complexes and shopping centers in the Twin Cities; on other days, it has headed out to farms and community centers as far north as International Falls.

Pleh Wah, a Saint Paul resident, was one of 22 people who decided to get the vaccine at the clinic in Saint Paul, explaining that it was close to where she lived. After getting the vaccine, she looks forward to being able to go to the park, store, and church with her family, which consists of her husband and two middle school-age children, who are students at Washington Technology Magnet school.

Shortly after Pleh Wah spoke to Sahan Journal, she returned to the waiting room in the community center to have a seat. Then, an older Asian person with a beige hat emerged with a bag of takeout food\*—a perk for receiving the shot.

The other people in the waiting room laughed at this unexpected door prize: One more vaccinated person also meant the pandemic was a little closer to coming to an end.

Community organizations interested in having a vaccine bus appear at an event can request one [here](#).

Correction: An earlier version of this story credited the free meal to The Food Group, a New Hope-based organization that saves surplus food from being thrown out. While the Food Group has collaborated with organizers at other vaccine events, it did not supply the food at McDonough Community Center.