

<https://www.henricocitizen.com/articles/in-the-shadows-of-richmond-raceway-vaccination-irony-becomes-evident/>

In the shadows of Richmond Raceway, vaccination irony becomes evident

Henrico Census tract that includes the region's most successful vaccination hub is itself the least-vaccinated in the county

By Tom Lappas | on May 06, 2021

The Henrico community that's proven the most difficult to vaccinate is the one that sits within eyesight of the region's most successful vaccination hub, where more than 150,000 doses of vaccine have been administered.

That irony, though, may not be surprising.

The communities adjacent to the Richmond Raceway, where Henrico and Virginia Department of Health officials have been holding mass vaccination events for more than three months and which just this week surpassed that 150,000-vaccination mark, are among the most vulnerable in the county.

Overwhelmingly, residents of Census tract 2008.05 (a 1.9-square-mile area that extends from just south of Laburnum Avenue near the raceway north to encompass the raceway, St. Luke Apartments and the Forest Lawn Cemetery, among other pockets of homes) are young, single, poor and Black, according to U.S. Census American Community Survey data from 2019.

More than 41% of the 3,700 or so residents there are living below the poverty line, earning an average of just more than \$22,000 annually per capita. Two-thirds of residents are 39 or younger. Eighty-five percent of those 15 or older are single. About 87% are Black.

Taken separately, most of those demographics present clear challenges for health officials seeking to vaccinate as many people as possible.

Together? They create a perfect storm of vaccination resistance – even if that resistance isn't entirely intentional.

A shift in strategy

The Richmond and Henrico Health Districts serve both localities, which include a total of 130 Census tracts (64 in Henrico, 66 in the city). The Henrico tract that includes the raceway is the only one in the county that ranks among the bottom 20% for vaccinations within the RHHD's territory, according to data provided to the Citizen by the districts; the others are all in Richmond.

That reality – that people within walking distance of the raceway are being vaccinated at a lower rate than those in every other Henrico community – exemplifies the challenge facing health officials as they move into the next phase of vaccinations.

Henrico residents who wanted to be vaccinated as soon as possible now have had that opportunity. RHHD officials had offered vaccination appointments to nearly everyone on their pre-registration list a week ago. Now, they must be proactive and strategic in how they reach out to those who haven't yet

gotten a shot.

They hope that increasing access to the vaccine will be a good starting point – but that doesn't just mean physical location of vaccination sites. After all, physical proximity isn't an issue for residents who live near the raceway, but time and availability might be.

With so many single adults and such a high percentage of children living in the raceway's Census tract – an estimated 30% of its population is younger than 16 – working parents struggling to make ends meet simply may not have the time or ability to schedule a vaccination during a work day even if they want to.

Those who are younger than 16 aren't eligible to be vaccinated yet anyway (though emergency use authorization for children and teens 12 to 15 could come within days for the Pfizer vaccine). That reality may be partly to blame for the low vaccination totals among residents near the raceway in particular, too.

Walk-up appointments, like the ones available on select days through the end of the month at the raceway, Virginia Union University, George Wythe High School and 342 CVS locations in Virginia, among others, should make it easier for some to get the vaccine.

But there's also still vaccine hesitancy statewide and nationally among some in the Black community, leery of previous vaccine and medical mistreatment of the community throughout U.S. history. In Henrico, Blacks account for nearly 30% of the population but only about 19% of all vaccinations, as of April 26, according to RHHD data. By contrast, whites compose about 54% of the population but more than 61% of those who have been vaccinated.

RHHD community health worker Ivy Bell has heard other explanations while working in local communities to administer vaccines about why some people are choosing not to get the shot.

“The most shocking was people who were wanting to get it but were listening to other people who didn't want to get it on why they shouldn't get it,” Bell said. A number of others told Bell they were waiting to get the vaccine to ensure that it was safe.

But, she said, some younger people were interested in being vaccinated.

“They were asking were they old enough to get it,” she said.

In general, though, plenty of young, healthy adults simply haven't made vaccination a priority because they are at a much lower risk of poor outcomes from COVID-19 if they get the virus.

In Henrico, only about 10% of those who had been vaccinated through April 26 were in their 20s, according to the RHHD. (The median age of residents of Tract 2008.05 is about 28.6.)

Addressing social vulnerabilities

In addition to the Census tract surrounding the raceway, officials from the RHHD have flagged 11 other tracts in Henrico as areas of vaccination concern – either because they rank high in social vulnerability categories that put residents at greater risk for negative consequences from the virus or hinder their efforts to be vaccinated (6); have experienced a high COVID-19 case burden (3); or both (2).

One of the latter two tracts sits adjacent to the raceway tract, just to the west; the other is a bit farther east, also along the Richmond-Henrico line (north of I-64 and south of Creighton Road, bisected by Dabbs House Road).

RHHD officials are spending time in each of those Census tracts in Henrico (and in 27 in Richmond), working to have conversations with residents to answer their questions about the vaccine.

“Some folks really appreciate that one on one, wanting to talk to a person in person,” said RHHD Health Equity Director Jackie Lawrence. “We always try to pair our staff in communities with folks who have cultural relativity. In some communities, door-knocking is ok. In other communities, it’s maybe not the best to knock on doors.”

In the latter instances, officials may visit laundromats or other places that attract people instead, she said.

“We know that hesitancy is a big player here,” Lawrence said. “By no means is the health department trying to force anyone or persuade anyone – we want to provide information, so that way people can make their own decisions.

“We’ve found that when people have way more information, we notice a shift. We believe [information] is the main pillar of empowerment.”

At the same time, health workers continue to encounter a steady stream of misinformation as they talk with people.

“There is so much going on that is not factual,” Lawrence said.

She and RHHD Nurse Manager Amy Popovich encourage people who have been vaccinated to share their experiences honestly – good or bad – with those who haven’t been.

“If today someone is not ready, that’s ok,” Popovich said. “You can invite them back to talk to you later about it. If folks are not ready, there will be time later, too.”

<https://www.henricocitizen.com/articles/letter-shows-federal-officials-knew-about-presence-of-pfas-in-eastern-henrico-in-april/>

Letter shows federal officials knew about presence of PFAS in Eastern Henrico in April

County, state officials – apparently not informed by feds – didn’t learn about chemicals until late October

By [Tom Lappas](#) | on December 17, 2021

Henrico and state officials first learned in late October that significantly elevated levels of potentially dangerous chemicals known as PFAS were present in the White Oak Swamp and Chickahominy River basin near Richmond International Airport in Eastern Henrico – but some federal officials knew at least six months earlier, the Citizen has learned.

County officials and others from the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality and Virginia Department of Health [found out about the chemicals less than two months ago](#) from Newport News Waterworks, which had traced them to Eastern Henrico after testing the 300-square-mile Chickahominy River watershed that supplies water to the Newport News region. It was the first time any of the agencies had been notified about the presence of PFAS in the area, officials from each have said in the weeks since.

The NNW testing and subsequent testing by the Virginia Department of Health and Virginia Department of Environmental Quality found PFAS levels in the region that exceeded the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s February health advisory level of 70 parts per trillion; in some spots, they were 30 to 40 times higher, according to Ron Harris of the NNW.

But the presence of elevated levels of the chemicals in waterways near the airport already had been established by U.S. National Guard Bureau officials through groundwater testing at the former Air National Guard Base at Richmond International Airport sometime before April 15, when NGB Environmental Division Chief Elaine Magdinec [sent a letter](#) to Sandston resident Ann V. Goggin explaining the situation.

In her letter, Magdinec wrote that “ANG activities [at the airport] may have released per- and polyfluroalkyl substances (PFAS).”

PFAS are long-lasting chemicals that don’t break down, and they can pose risks to anyone who drinks water that contains them, according to Virginia Department of Health State Public Health Toxicologist Dwight Flammia. They’re commonly found in a variety of items, including firefighting foam, non-stick cookware, certain carpet, fabric and food packaging and other products that are designed to resist liquids and stains.

Air National Guard Base operations at the airport ended in 2008. A Virginia National Guard unit maintains an active presence at a different site at the airport.

Magdinec’s letter – which apparently was sent at a minimum to property owners whose land is within a mile from the former ANGB site – indicated that the NGB had obtained Goggin’s name from the U.S.

Department of Agriculture, with whom it had consulted about the matter.

The letter also indicated that the NGB would be working with state agencies in the months ahead.

“The Byrd Field ANGB will coordinate its investigation with the appropriate state regulators and provide opportunities for public participation,” Magdinec wrote. “ANG will work with you and the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality to share information on our ongoing efforts to ensure the protection of human health and the environment.”

A timeline presented at a public webinar Nov. 16 showed the processes that led to local and state officials learning about the elevated levels of PFAS in Eastern Henrico – levels that federal officials apparently knew about in April. (Courtesy Virginia DEQ)

But Virginia DEQ Director of Central Operations Jeff Steers told the Citizen that no one from the NGB or any other federal agency ever contacted the DEQ or other state or local officials about the issue in the six months between the date of Magdinec’s letter and the time NNW officials alerted them of their own findings.

Instead, those officials learned of the federal involvement at a Dec. 1 town meeting about the issue in Henrico hosted by Varina District Supervisor Tyrone Nelson. At that meeting, Goggin presented the letter to the county and state officials in attendance.

“We’ve seen these types of letters on other DOD [Department of Defense] sites where they have a legal obligation under federal law to notify [landowners and others] of potential contamination offsite,” Steers said. “We had not gotten copied [on the letter] or seen anything from this site.”

As a federal agency, Steers said, the DOD is able to conduct clean-up activities at one of its sites with assistance from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and without involving state or local officials. But, Steers said, it would be helpful for state and local officials to be kept informed.

“They’re typically not going to interact with us unless we know there’s a problem,” he said. “[But] yes, ideally we partner with the federal agencies on all kinds of sites and we try to work together with them in making sure we all are communicating effectively. This should be no different. We will make it clear that going forward we want to be part of those communications. We need to be responsive to citizens, too.”

Since learning of the NGB letter, Steers said, state officials have reached out to their federal counterparts in an attempt to have discussions and meetings with them about the issue. That process has been challenging, because communication with representatives for the ANGB has been more difficult than that with representatives from the Virginia National Guard, he said.

“This really does need to be a coordinated review and make sure we’re all on the same page,” said Steers.

It’s still unclear to DEQ officials whether the sole source of the PFAS found in Henrico was firefighting foam used at the ANGB site or if other sources might also have contributed to the high levels. It’s relatively easy to trace specific types of PFAS to specific types of sources, he said – for example, those from firefighting foam are easily differentiated from those used in manufacturing.

Officials from the NGB have not responded to multiple requests for comment from the Citizen during

the past two weeks.

Meanwhile, DEQ officials are continuing an active investigation into other potential sources; there are a number of manufacturing operations near the airport that theoretically could be contributing to the PFAS levels, Steers implied.

And during the past few weeks, Henrico County [has been conducting testing of private wells](#) on some of the 120 or so properties in the region deemed to be most risk from the elevated levels of PFAS, while U.S. Geological Services officials (in coordination with the DEQ) have been conducting tests of sediment and fish tissue in the region, in an attempt to determine how long the chemicals may have been in the waterways.

Results from the county's tests should be available within several weeks of when they've been conducted, Henrico Public Utilities Director Bentley Chan told the Citizen last month, while the USGS testing results likely won't be available until early next year, Steers said Thursday.

Negative affects related to long-term exposure to elevated levels of PFAS (primarily through consumption of water containing the chemicals) may include increased cholesterol, decreased vaccine response in children, changes in liver enzymes, increased risk of high blood pressure or pre-eclampsia in pregnant women, small decreases in birth weight, and increased risk of kidney and testicular cancer, according to Virginia Department of Health officials.

<https://www.henricocitizen.com/articles/2-environmental-organizations-sue-henrico-county-over-series-of-pollution-violations-involving-james-river/>

2 environmental organizations sue Henrico County over ‘series of pollution violations’ involving James River

By [Tom Lappas](#) | on December 06, 2021

Frustrated by what they termed “a series of pollution violations over many years” involving Henrico County’s sewer system, two environmental organizations Monday filed a lawsuit against the county in U.S. District Court, seeking legal action to protect the health of the James River and a number of its tributaries.

The suit filed in the Eastern District Court of Virginia by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and James River Association alleges that repeated failures of the Henrico Water Reclamation Facility in Varina since its 1989 opening have resulted in millions of gallons of raw sewage – 66 million gallons in the past five years alone – escaping into the James and feeder streams and creeks, in violation of the federal Clean Water Act. (A third organization, the Environmental Integrity Project, also is part of the suit but not named formally as a plaintiff.)

“The continued operation of the Henrico WRF in this manner presents a significant threat to the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the James River and its tributaries,” the suit reads. The plaintiffs sent a notice of intent to sue – required by the CWA at least 60 days before a suit is actually filed – to Henrico officials Aug. 11.

In a press release and during a press conference Monday, representatives of the organizations said they took legal action in an effort to force the county to address the problem expeditiously – something they said hasn’t occurred to date, despite more than 40 violation notices and four separate consent orders from the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality.

“Action is needed to protect our streams, our river, and public health from the serious pollution violations in Henrico County,” James Riverkeeper and Senior Advocacy Manager with the James River Association Jamie Brunkow said in a statement. “Local communities deserve waterways that are safe for swimming and fishing, but for at least 30 years Henrico County has allowed sewage and bacteria to plague local streams.”

Later during the press conference, Brunkow attributed the sewage releases to “critical failures with an inadequate or crumbling sewer infrastructure across Henrico County.”

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The lawsuit filed against Henrico alleges that between September 2016 and June this year, nearly 240 individual overflows caused by the county’s system dumped more than 66 million gallons of raw, untreated sewage into the James River and its tributaries – most of that amount (49 million gallons) in 2018, when rain levels were higher than normal in the region. Between Jan. 1 and Oct. 7 this year, the

sewer system allowed 1.2 million gallons of raw sewage into the James and its tributaries, according to DEQ data compiled by JRA and CBF. The county, like all localities in the state, is required to report overflows and other violations to the DEQ, which also receives reports of potential violations from citizens.

“Henrico County, through its operation of the Henrico Water Reclamation Facility, has contributed an exorbitant amount of pollutants to the James River basin over the last 30 years,” said CBF attorney Taylor Lilley. “Henrico has jeopardized the health of the James River and its tributaries and posed significant health risks to surrounding communities.”

A sanitary sewer system, like the one in use in Henrico, carries only sewage and not stormwater; such systems only overflow when there is a defect or blockage. Some other localities, like Richmond, have older “combined” sewer systems that carry both stormwater and sewage in the same pipes. In Richmond, during times of heavy rain, the system intentionally overflows, spilling sewage into the river (more than 3 billion gallons in 2018 alone, according to DEQ data).

Last year, the HWRF significantly exceeded its sediment pollution levels, which Brunkow said is affecting water quality, wildlife and the ability of citizens to safely use the waterways.

Monday afternoon, Henrico officials responded to the lawsuit with this statement, provided to the Citizen by Public Relations Director Ben Sheppard: “Henrico County is dedicated to protecting the health of the public and is deeply committed to environmental stewardship in Central Virginia and the Chesapeake Bay. The county is reviewing this lawsuit and looks forward to a full presentation of the facts through the legal process.”

Henrico has been fined twice by the DEQ – in 2003 (\$25,500) and 2010 (\$29,500) for violations related to sewage overflows that released higher than allowable limits of various pollutants (including nitrogen, suspended solids, ammonia, and chlorine) into the waterways.

Between September 2016 and June this year, 42.3 million gallons of the raw sewage that overflowed into local waterways went to the Tuckahoe Creek during 18 separate overflow incidents, according to the data collected and presented in the lawsuit.

The most egregious incident occurred Oct. 11, 2018, when 25.4 million gallons of raw sewage were reported to have flowed into the Tuckahoe Creek, according to the lawsuit. That incident came a little less than five months after an May 17 overflow that sent 7.25 million gallons of raw sewage into the creek.

Other overflow incidents during the same time period affected a wide variety of waterways, including the Chickahominy River, Gillies Creek, Upham Brook, North Run, Almond Creek, Horse Swamp Creek, Kanawha Canal, Broadwater Creek, Meredith Branch, Lake Overton, Deep Run and others.

“These problems are quite widespread across Henrico County,” Brunkow said. “That’s why we’re taking this legal action – to call on Henrico County to step up and to ensure a long-term solution is in place to protect the river and our local communities.”

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On Aug. 25, Henrico and Virginia DEQ officials signed a fifth proposed consent order (stemming from violations) that would result in the county being fined more than \$207,000. But, that order hasn’t yet

been finalized, according to the lawsuit, and doesn't name any necessary long-term projects or system-wide improvements.

As a result, officials from the CBF and JRA said they filed their lawsuit Monday in an attempt to force the county to conduct a comprehensive review of the sewer system to determine the scope and cost of repairs and to establish a firm completion date for that work – something that they said doesn't exist currently.

“Because Henrico County has not fixed this problem to protect the public, we had no alternative but to take legal action,” Environmental Integrity Project attorney Sylvia Lam said. “Other cities and counties have been required to provide public notice when the sewage overflows occur in local creeks and streams. This consent order doesn't include that. . . [but] Henrico should be required to do the same in order to protect public health. Members of the public aren't aware that the waterways they use. . . are contaminated with raw sewage from overflows.”

Representatives from the organizations involved with the suit continue to talk with Henrico officials, Lilley said, and hope to speak with DEQ officials, too, to find a comprehensive solution to the issue, ideally before the case goes to court.

“Taking a piecemeal approach for 30-odd years hasn't gotten us anywhere,” Lilley said.