

OPINION

WANT TO COMMENT? Have Your Say at letters@usatoday.com, @usatodayopinion on Twitter and facebook.com/usatodayopinion. Comments are edited for length and clarity. Content submitted to USA TODAY may appear in print, digital or other forms. For letters, include name, address and phone number. Letters may be mailed to 7950 Jones Branch Drive, McLean, VA, 22108.

TODAY'S DEBATE: COVID-19 VACCINE INCENTIVES

Our View: A spoonful of sugar does help the medicine go down

There's good news about the COVID-19 vaccines almost daily. New research shows immunity from the shot could last years, perhaps a lifetime.

And all major vaccines – Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson versions in the United States – appear effective against most feared, emerging variants, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The only shadow cast on this American success story is that tens of millions of people still resist inoculation. And their individual risk is that despite a national decline in COVID-19 cases and the joy for millions who with shots are now immune, infection rates among the unvaccinated in several states are as severe as they were in the darkest days of winter, according to a Washington Post analysis.

'How many people will die if we don't do this?'

Mike DeWine,
Governor of Ohio

So how can a free Krispy Kreme doughnut make a difference? If it incentivizes one person to roll up a sleeve and get vaccinated, that's a very good thing.

Americans have been plied with free pastries, free Uber or Lyft rides to vaccination sites, free beer, free concerts, free trips to the Bronx Zoo, a pound of free crawfish and even free joints (yes, the funny kind) if they'll just get jabbed.

And the vaccination inducements don't end there.

CVS Health, which has administered more than 17 million doses through its pharmacies, last week announced that it will hold a sweepstakes for all those who have gotten the vaccine from one of its outlets or who plan to. Top prize: a VIP trip for two to the next Super Bowl. Other giveaways includes hundreds or thousands of dollars in cash, cruises or trips to Bermuda.

State governments have joined this tsunami of subornation, starting with West Virginia in late April promising \$100 savings bonds to residents ages 16-

35 who get the shot. Since then, state giveaways have gone through the roof, with millions of dollars in payoffs promised in Colorado, Maryland, New York, Ohio, Oregon and, most recently, California, which will dole out \$116.5 million in an array of prizes that include \$1.5 million to each of 10 vaccinated residents chosen at random.

Does any of this work?

Americans prodded by pollsters have conceded that, well, yes, Mary Poppins was right, a spoonful of sugar does help the medicine go down. About a third of the unvaccinated said a cash payment could make all the difference. (The incentive was stronger among Democrats than Republicans, for whatever that's worth.)

In being the first of governors to push for million-dollar promotional drawing giveaways, Ohio's Mike DeWine wrote in an opinion piece that his target was that group of people who are just noncommittal about getting the shot. He said he was guided by a single question: "How many people will die if we don't do this?"

That potential loss of life, combined with the cost of health care and diminished productivity when people get COVID-19, far outweighs the expense of the promotional giveaway, DeWine wrote.

And in the end, according to a review by The Associated Press, the number of Ohioans 16 and older who got vaccinated in the week after the governor announced his lottery increased by 33%.

Last week, 22-year-old Abigail Bugenske of Silverton, Ohio, became the first of what will be five million-dollar recipients for getting the COVID-19 vaccine. "It was a crazy night," she told reporters.

Detractors may say that it's unseemly to pay people to do the sensible thing, or that the money could be better used. Colorado Gov. Jared Polis is financing his state's giveaway with federal coronavirus relief funds. But in the end, DeWine has it right. What's most important is lives saved.

So go ahead and take your shot. There may be way more than a Krispy Kreme doughnut in it for you.

Another View: Counteract the anti-science aggression



Dr. Peter Hotez
Baylor College of Medicine

Our best hope of slowing or even halting COVID-19 virus transmission is through vaccination. Based on our earlier studies, we will need about three-quarters of the U.S. population vaccinated to achieve this goal. But with more transmissible variants, we may need to vaccinate just about all American adults and adolescents.

In regards to vaccination rates, we are making good progress on the East and West Coasts, but in the South and in Idaho and Wyoming, vaccine coverage remains low. For instance, the vaccination rates in Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi are about half that of Vermont and Massachusetts. Idaho and Wyoming are only slightly better than these Southern states.

The North-South or Blue-Red gap appears to be increasing over time. Therefore, the major vaccination barrier appears to be significant rates of refusal among conservatives living in deep red states.

So how do we correct this?

It is not at all clear that incentivizing groups through expensive prizes and gifts can overcome the fact that many living in the South and elsewhere now tie their political allegiance to vaccine defiance. While token prizes such as a doughnut or a pizza slice are fun and

harmless, it's unlikely that more elaborate material incentives will provide significant rates of return in terms of vaccine coverage.

Moreover, there is a potential downside, namely the awful optics of needing to bribe Americans to vaccinate as the rest of the world desperately seeks vaccine doses.

Instead, we need to reach out to conservative communities and news networks (or their leaders) and ask for their help and advice.

In parallel, we may need a more aggressive approach to countering the waves of disinformation coming from well-funded anti-vaccine groups. They include those identified by the Center for Countering Digital Hate, anti-science and anti-vaccine organizations with tens of millions of followers on social media.

We must also halt Russian government efforts to destabilize America through its anti-vaccine communications across multiple media platforms.

Until as a nation we resolve to counteract the anti-science aggression, we may fail to vaccinate our way out of this epidemic by this summer and soon face the specter of emerging variants of concern.

Peter Hotez, MD and Ph.D., is Professor of Pediatrics and Molecular Virology and Microbiology, and Dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine. His latest book is "Preventing the Next Pandemic: Vaccine Diplomacy in a Time of Anti-Science."



MIKE THOMPSON/USA TODAY NETWORK

Why won't our leaders act on gun violence?

We're part of a tragic club that keeps growing

Sandy and Lonnie Phillips
Survivors Empowered



Sandy Phillips, Lonnie Phillips and daughter Jessica Redfield Ghawi in Mexico in 2009. FAMILY PHOTO

Gun violence couldn't be more personal for us, the parents of a 24-year-old who was killed in the 2012 slaughter in Aurora, Colorado. We are being re-traumatized again and again by endless new shootings, and thoughts and prayers aren't what we need. We want an immediate response from public officials at all levels, because the carnage isn't stopping, while appropriate legislation and other measures have so often ground to a halt.

We know something about turning pain into purpose. After our daughter was murdered and we had to cope with the horrors of her death and its aftermath, we began to support others who were faced with similar trauma. Survivors Empowered was our response to devastation. We are overwhelmed with the number of people coming to us for succor – and with the post-traumatic stress disorder that we and they experience at every new massacre.

The toll is staggering. The nation has endured an average of 10 mass shootings each week since the year began, and 12 in just one May weekend.

Last Wednesday, nine people were shot dead at a rail yard in San Jose, California. Early Sunday, across the country, two people were shot to death and 21 injured at a Miami-area banquet hall.

Last year nearly 20,000 people were killed by gun attacks, more than in at least two decades, and more than 24,000 died by suicide with a gun.

We use many methods to help fellow survivors, from literal hand holding to practical advice. Until the pandemic grounded us, we used our RV to visit the sites of our country's very unnatural disasters. We also launched a Mindfulness Meditation Program, housed at the University of California, San Diego, that trains survivors to teach others this very effective method to deal with post-traumatic stress.

Firehose of death

It is a great challenge to quiet one's mind and find peace again after a firearm has torn it apart. Mindfulness meditation can help restore one's ability to focus and find calm.

But new methods of helping people deal with grief are not enough. We want to see the firehose of death cut off at the source – and we want to see officials enact gun safety measures that respect the public health crisis we're facing. Words are not sufficient. "Thoughts and prayers" are, by now, a painful phrase. We need action. We are not alone, and we are working with others to help surmount governmental stagnation and blocked change.

We have been waiting for years for universal background checks to be mandated. The American people overwhelmingly back such legislation. Nevertheless, even after child murders at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012 and at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in 2018, no such law has been passed.

We have suffered personally from the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, which insulates gun and ammunition manufacturers from accountability when their products are sold without safeguards, and destroy lives.

We decry the unfettered distribution of large-capacity magazines and assault weapons with body counts mimicking battlefields, bullets ricocheting across American cities and towns. And we are amazed that something as simple as a three-day waiting period before buying a gun is controversial.

Protect freedom from loss

It is true that some progress has been made. President Joe Biden has signed executive orders and is contemplating more, and he's supportive of federal legislation. Massachusetts has curbed the sale of weapons of war. Most states have given the nod to at least some gun safety measures – though far from enough.

At the same time, Texas is becoming even more retrograde in its gun policies, with its very wrongheaded "constitutional carry" law on Gov. Greg Abbott's desk. He has said he will sign the law and allow Texans to carry guns without a permit. What's next, Gov. Abbott? Allowing people to drive without a license?

We are concerned as well about what might be brewing at the Supreme Court, which has taken up a new gun case that attacks a state's right to regulate carrying a concealed weapon outside the home. We fervently hope that the Second Amendment will not be further twisted by an interpretation that could cost us all a very important freedom – freedom from fear, and horrifying losses.

In a time when hate is mushrooming, we want to see public policy that creates more peace and tranquility. We need public servants to serve and protect all of us – and work to stop the tragic expansion of the survivors' club nobody wants to join.

Sandy and Lonnie Phillips are the founders of Survivors Empowered.