



UMB News

UMB Assistant Dean Featured in Biden Town Hall

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When will the vaccines for young children be ready? And how accessible will they be once released?



Neijma Celestine-Donnor, MSW '09, LCSW-C, of the University of Maryland School of Social Work asks President Biden about vaccines for young children. (CNN)

Those are the questions posed to President Biden by **Neijma Celestine-Donnor, MSW '09, LCSW-C**, assistant dean for diversity, equity, and inclusion at the [University of Maryland School of Social Work \(UMSSW\)](#), during a CNN Presidential Town Hall on Thursday, Oct. 21, in Baltimore.

"I was really honored to be able to ask him something that is important to me as a mother, as a social worker, as a professional who does equity and inclusion work," Celestine-Donnor said Friday afternoon, taking a day off after a whirlwind experience.

Celestine-Donnor found herself and husband Carl Donner in the front row at Baltimore Center Stage, mere steps from the president and host Anderson Cooper and a few seats away from First Lady Jill Biden, EdD.

"I literally did not know until the commercial break when the producer tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'You're going to get to speak to the president,'" Celestine-Donnor said.

"As a mom of two boys and also being Black and an immigrant, accessibility to the vaccine was really important to me," said Celestine-Donnor, a Trinidad native and mother to sons Zaelon, 7, and Zaiki, 4.

The sons were at home with a babysitter, watching their mother on TV that earned her "a lot of good parent points."

This all started earlier in the week when a colleague of hers at Morgan State University sent her an RSVP link to the town hall, asking if she'd be able to attend and what she would like the president to talk about. On Wednesday, CNN called making sure she could come along with a plus-one.

"That point in time I thought they were calling everyone," she said. "It was not registering to me that I'm actually going to speak to the president."

Being in the front row, it was like the president was speaking to *her* the entire time.

About halfway through the event, he certainly did.

The [president's full response](#) to Celestine-Donnor:

I believe — and I want to make it clear: Unlike past administrations, science will dictate this. I'm not telling anyone at — (applause) — no, I really mean it. (Applause.)

But I do ask my COVID team what the expectations are. The expectations are it'll be ready in the near term — meaning weeks, not, not months and months. OK? That's number one.

Number two, there are over 800,000 sites right now that exist in America where you can go get a vaccine. And you're going to be able to do that with your children, particularly — we're going to try to work it out to deal with child care centers — make it available there — as well as your pediatricians and the — you know, and the docs — and finding places where you can do it. Some places are talking about doing at — you know, in churches on the weekend and that kind of thing.

So there'll be plenty of places to — to be able to get the vaccine when — if and when it is approved.

And it's likely to be approved. I spent a lot of time with the team on these things. And it's likely to be approved and what — whether it's Moderna or whether it's Pfizer or whether it's J&J — it's going to be approved. And it will be a much smaller dose — basically the same dose, but a smaller dose. And they're doing a lot of tests on it right now.

And — and those of you who have children or brothers or sisters who are between — you know, who are in that age category above 12, get — get the vaccine for them. Get the vaccine. (Applause.) Get it now.

Celestine-Donnor, who identifies as an independent, appreciated Biden's answer.

"I think the answer that he gave was a truthful answer," she said. "I appreciate his honesty and that he didn't make something up and have a realistic understanding."

However, she wanted to hear more about accessibility to the vaccine.

"Also being dean for diversity, equity, and inclusion, access is something I think about all the time," said Celestine-Donnor, who is in the final year of studying for her Juris Doctor degree at the University of Baltimore.

"Even though I don't necessarily agree with all of the policies the president has, being able to meet and have a conversation with him is something I do consider to be a really good experience."

Yes, the University of Maryland, Baltimore does have experts who are well-versed in vaccine approvals and accessibility, including **Wilbur H. Chen, MD, MS, FIDSA, FACP**, professor of medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine (UMSOM) and a voting member of the federal government's [Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices](#) .

With all due respect to Chen, when the president speaks, the world listens.

"Even though we have people who can speak on vaccines at UMB, they're not the leaders of the free world," Celestine-Donnor said. "There is a particular significance hearing that from their president. There's a sense of security."

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