



COMMISSION ON AGING

February 2, 2021

Travis A. Gayles, MD, PhD
County Health Officer and Chief of Public Health Services
401 Hungerford Drive, 5th Floor
Rockville, MD 20850

Dear Dr. Gayles:

I am writing on behalf of the Montgomery County Commission on Aging (CoA) to raise issues about Montgomery County's rollout and management of the COVID-19 vaccination process and to make recommendations to improve the process.

The CoA is authorized by the *Older Americans Act* and was established by Montgomery County in 1974 to advise County government on the needs, interests, and issues of older adult residents, and to advocate on their behalf at the local, State, and national levels.

We recognize the difficult challenges that the County faces because of the shortage of vaccines and the way in which the State is distributing the vaccine to the Counties. We appreciate your office's efforts to expedite vaccinations and recognize some matters are beyond your control. However, there is an urgent need for better communication of COVID-19 vaccination information – who is providing vaccines, where, and what policies are being followed.

County residents are receiving inconsistent and incomplete information about the vaccines. Information posted by the County and the State is not always consistent across websites and is sometimes outdated. Often the websites and organizations scheduling vaccinations are not those mentioned in official notices. The fact that vaccination policies at County clinics may be different from policies of other providers within the County or the State is further confusing.

Finding where, when, and how to get vaccinated is time-consuming and frustrating, especially for many older adults who struggle with technology, mobility, and vision or hearing issues. Other more able older adult residents can use informal networks to learn where and when appointments are available. While this is helpful to those with strong networking skills and the ability to travel to more distant locations or on short notice, it likely will contribute to increased social inequalities in vaccine access.

Department of Health and Human Services

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We also are very concerned about the extent to which health conditions are considered along with age. The County's opaque process for scheduling appointments seems to inadequately address the risks to older adults with serious health conditions. Many of these individuals have frequent medical appointments – e.g., regular infusions or dialysis – that increase their potential exposure to the virus. Until the State moved to Phase 1C on January 25, older adults younger than age 75 with serious medical conditions did not qualify for the vaccine at the County clinics even if they were 6 months to a year short of 75. Now that the State has moved to Phase 1C, it is not yet clear what the County will do. What is clear is that a much larger group of people will be eligible and there will not be enough vaccines for all.

Recommendations

Communication

We recommend that Montgomery County supplement existing communication efforts with twice daily multilingual public service announcements on radio and TV. They should include information on new vaccine availability, locations, eligibility, and how to register and make appointments online and by phone. Students in need of Student Service-Learning credits or interested in volunteering could be enlisted to staff phones and reply to emails from those seeking information and to help with registration and appointments.

Distribution

In order to target the distribution of the vaccine to the most in need, the County should use the medical data that it collects to prioritize more vulnerable older adults in Phase 1B (75 and over) and Phase 1C (65-74). The feasibility of prioritizing older adults with serious medical conditions in both Phases ahead of others is important and requires further consideration.

In closing, the Commission on Aging would welcome the opportunity to work with Montgomery County's Health and Wellness Programs staff. We look forward to joining with you to serve our County's older adults in this time of need.

Sincerely,

Barbara Selter sb

Barbara Selter, Chair
Montgomery County Commission on Aging

cc: Montgomery County Council Members
Marc Elrich, Montgomery County Executive
Dr. Earl Stoddard, Director, Montgomery County Office of Emergency Management & Homeland Security
Dr. Raymond Crowel, Director, Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services