



**Written Testimony
for the
Senate Aging & Youth Committee
and
Senate Health & Human Services Committee
Joint Public Hearing
on the
Implementation of the State COVID-19 Vaccination Plan
February 4, 2021**

With appreciation to Senators Judy Ward and Marie Collette, Majority and Minority Chairs of the Senate Aging & Youth Committee, respectively, and to Senators Michele Brooks and Art Haywood, Majority and Minority Chairs of the Senate Health & Human Services Committee, respectively, this written testimony is submitted for the record in the above captioned public hearing.

AARP Pennsylvania acknowledges the care and concern expressed and the actions taken by many to address the public health crisis we face because of the coronavirus pandemic. Even though millions of doses of the COVID-19 vaccines have shipped across the country, we acknowledge that vaccine production and distribution must be ramped up so that everyone who desires to be vaccinated can be. Yet, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) vaccine tracker, Pennsylvania is among sixteen states that have administered less than half of the vaccine doses they have received. The delays we are experiencing in getting vaccine into the arms of Pennsylvanians who desire to be vaccinated is beyond acceptable. Our overarching message to Pennsylvania is that the Keystone State needs to determine how it will safely, equitably, and effectively distribute COVID-19 vaccines and it must take immediate action to provide clear, consistent information about when, where and how the 50+ population can get their shots – as well as assistance in signing up.

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Health (DoH), since the start of the pandemic, the statewide total of positive cases of COVID-19 is 850,488 and the total number of deaths is 21,812.¹ Pennsylvanians 50 years of age and older have accounted for 98 percent of all deaths from COVID-19. Racial demographics are equally disturbing. White Americans are receiving the coronavirus vaccine at a higher rate than Black and

¹ PA Dept. of Health as of Feb. 2, 2021

Latino communities, underscoring how minority communities continue to be disproportionately hit by the ongoing pandemic. According to a new analysis from CNN, in Pennsylvania, African Americans make up 13 percent of COVID-19 deaths, but only 3 percent of vaccinations. Pennsylvania also has the most striking disparity: White people have been vaccinated at four times the rate of African Americans when accounting for the population of each racial group.²

AARP Pennsylvania has 1.8 million members, and we have heard from them and the 50+ community about their experiences and frustrations in trying to get a vaccine. Although most of those eligible for the vaccine in Phase 1A desperately want to get it, we are also hearing from many black and brown communities, that in addition to access to the vaccine, they face other barriers like distrust in the vaccine. There is a long history of discrimination and exploitation of African Americans by the medical establishment that has led to a mistrust and disparities impacting communities of color. This regretful history could be a contributing factor in a lower rate of vaccinations in the African American community. For example, Black Philadelphians make up merely 12 percent of vaccine recipients, though they make up 44 percent of the city's population. For a community that has already been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, a lack of trust and access to the vaccines needs to be addressed.

Overall, Pennsylvania's distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine has been marked by unpredictable amounts of vaccine delivered, shifting eligibility criteria, varying and confusing distribution plans across counties, and on-line registration systems that confound even those who are computer literate and leave behind those without internet access. The situation has led to frustration, confusion, and anxiety for many. It is time to stop pointing fingers of blame and work together to remove the barriers that exist so that all individuals and families can access the vaccine regardless of age, income, race and ethnicity.

What needs to happen?

- State and local public health officials need to provide clear and timely information about when and where vaccines are available – and must provide assistance to those who need help signing up.
- On-line sign-ups must be easy to navigate; and information must be provided in multiple languages and not just through the internet.

² <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/26/us/vaccination-disparities-rollout/index.html>

- Approved vaccine providers must be available, widely publicized and adequately staffed. AARP is hearing that people are on-hold for long periods, only to be told that no appointments are available.
- Ensure that communities of color and other underserved people receive information about COVID-19 vaccines from people they trust, like family, friends, doctors, religious and community leaders; and bring vaccine clinics to them in their neighborhoods rather than requiring them to go to their local hospital.

Thank you for your leadership in arranging this joint hearing on Pennsylvania's COVID-19 vaccination plan. AARP Pennsylvania stands ready to help you get COVID-19 vaccine information to older Pennsylvanians across the commonwealth as quickly as possible.

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