



**Written Testimony of**  
**The Pennsylvania Health Care Association**

**Delivered by**  
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**For A**  
**Public Hearing on**  
**the Implementation of the State Vaccine Plan**

**Delivered Virtually**

**Before the**  
**Senate Aging and Youth and**  
**Health and Human Services Committees**

**February 4, 2021**

Chairwoman Ward, Chairwoman Brooks, Chairwoman Collett, and Chairman Haywood, Members of the Health and Human Services and Aging and Youth Committees,

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to be with you again for today's hearing.

I'm Zach Shamberg, and I am the president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Health Care Association, better known as PHCA.

We're a statewide organization advocating on behalf of non-profit and for-profit long-term care facilities, including nursing homes, personal care homes and assisted living communities, as well as their front line workers and the residents they serve.

This is not my first time speaking to your committees since the pandemic began. And today, rather than focus on the illness that is COVID-19, we have the opportunity to, finally, talk about the remedy.

But what happens when that remedy does not come quickly enough?

When the COVID-19 vaccine was first approved for emergency use by the FDA, it was cause for celebration for the providers we represent, for their workers and their residents and their loved ones.

And in early December, when the CDC's Prevention Advisory Committee voted resoundingly to recommend long-term care residents and staff receive priority for the vaccine, we were almost assured that Pennsylvania's long-term care providers, their hundreds of thousands of staff and residents - would finally see the light at the end of this long, dark tunnel they've been living in for the last year.

On Monday, December 14, the first vaccine arrived in Pennsylvania.

And not a single long-term care resident or worker received it.

One day went by. Then one week. Then two weeks.

Not a single long-term care resident or staff member received a dose of the COVID-19 vaccine until Monday, December 28 – a full two weeks after Pennsylvania's hospitals received their doses, and the same day the state of New Jersey, which missed a federal filing deadline, began to vaccinate its facilities, and the same day West Virginia completed its first round of vaccinations for all long-term care residents and staff.

I must ask: why? Why would long-term care be forced to wait for the antidote to something that has, quite literally, killed thousands?

Based on the latest data we have, only 550 nursing homes have completed their first vaccination clinic - there are 700 nursing homes throughout the commonwealth. And only 32 assisted living communities and personal care homes have been scheduled or received their first vaccine - there are 1,200.

Again, I am compelled to ask: why?

For the first time in recent history, our team at PHCA has been inundated with emails and phone calls from the concerned family members of our residents, all asking the same two questions: “When will my loved one be vaccinated?” and “What can we do to speed up this process?”

As we continue to address those questions and work through these challenges with our providers, as well as the pharmacy partners tasked with distributing the vaccine, we remain deeply concerned about the challenges and ‘unknowns’ that lie ahead.

**First, will the allocation of the vaccine to long-term care providers truly be prioritized and increased, especially as new populations have been added to the Phase-1A designation?**

On January 19, the Department of Health expanded Phase 1A priority populations to include anyone over the age of 65, as well as those over the age of 16 with one of 14 conditions – including those who smoke.

In some cases, this new group is receiving vaccines even before those in long-term care.

Additionally, it is our understanding that only 17% of the vaccine has been allocated to long-term care thus far. If that is ‘prioritization’, I hate to think where the general population falls in this plan.

**Second, after the federal pharmacy partnership comes to an end, what is the state’s plan to vaccinate long-term care residents and staff, including new hires, as well as new patients and residents?**

The pharmacy teams on-the-ground at these clinics have told providers that they will not offer a first dose of the vaccine during the third scheduled clinic, but what about new residents or new staff members who were not able to receive the dose in rounds one or two? How will providers ensure new residents and staff are able to receive the vaccine?

**And third, what does reopening and visitation look like in long-term care?**

As you can imagine, family members are not only calling PHCA...they are calling our member facilities and asking when they can be reunited with their loved ones. I am sure you’re receiving similar calls from constituents in your district offices.

Providers are eager to help facilitate these visits as soon as possible, but they must also have clear, post-vaccination guidance from the Department of Health.

For the second-most regulated industry in the entire country, it’s not as easy as simply reopening the doors again.

I’ll close by saying this: last spring, we called for prioritization of long-term care. Today is no different.

Every day without a vaccine is one more day in which we risk the lives of our most vulnerable residents.

We respectfully ask the members today to instill urgency in the commonwealth. And ensure that the providers we represent are at the table, helping to guide these decisions moving forward.

Thank you.