



AARP Pennsylvania Testimony
for the
House Aging and Older Adult Services Committee
Public Hearing on COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution
for Older Adults and Long-Term Care in PA
Tuesday, March 2, 2021

Good Morning. My name is Bill Johnston-Walsh. I am the State Director for AARP Pennsylvania. On behalf of our 1.8 million members and all older Pennsylvanians, we appreciate the opportunity to participate in today's Public Hearing on COVID-19 vaccine distribution for older adults and long-term care in Pennsylvania. Thank you, Chairman Day and Chairman Samuelson, Majority and Minority Chairs of the House Aging and Older Adults Services Committee respectively, for holding this hearing.

When the first COVID-19 vaccines became available in Pennsylvania on December 14, 2020, an immediate focus was properly placed on reaching the arms of health care workers and residents and staff of nursing facilities. Thirty-six days later, Pennsylvania expanded its COVID-19 vaccine Phase 1A distribution plan to include people aged 65 years and older, as well as those 16 to 64 years of age with high-risk medical conditions. As we gather today for this hearing to discuss COVID-19 vaccine distribution for older adults, seventy-eight days have passed since the first inoculation; and during this time, AARP has heard from thousands of our members who are quite angry, deeply frustrated, and increasingly desperate at a vaccine distribution system that is confusing, complicated, and challenging.

To illustrate what we are hearing, we recently sent an informal survey to our Pennsylvania members. Within twenty-four hours, over 3,400 responses were received. Eighty-one percent of respondents reported they have tried to secure a vaccine appointment and only twenty-seven percent reported success thus far. AARP members are telling us in great numbers and in no uncertain terms that they are very disappointed with Pennsylvania's efforts to distribute COVID-19 vaccines. Most of those eligible for a vaccine reported encountering huge logistical hurdles in simply making an appointment. Many county vaccination sign-up websites have crashed under the weight of tremendous traffic. State and local health department phone lines have been overwhelmed with calls; and some county and municipal health bureaus have abandoned using

PrepMod, a Maryland-based online clinic management and appointment scheduling system provided by the state for free after problems were encountered, including overbooking and allowing ineligible people to sign up for a vaccine appointment.

Needless to say, the stories we are hearing from AARP members demonstrate how the vaccine distribution plan is fragmented, hard to navigate, and is leaving behind some of our most vulnerable and at-risk populations. In the words of one Montgomery County member who responded to the survey, *"It is like the Wild West, totally decentralized and frustrating."* Another member from Northampton County said, *"Every time I try and schedule an appointment I get a reply that no appointments are available at this time. I am 66 years old and have COPD and am very worried for my safety."* Finally, a member from Butler County shared, *"My mom is 84 and has lung disease and multiple other problems, and I can't get her in. I'm done with it. We will wait till the spring or summer. It's too stressful being on the computer day and night trying to get in somewhere."*

The voices of AARP members are coming through loud and clear - - the delay Pennsylvanians in Phase 1A are experiencing scheduling COVID-19 vaccines remains simply unacceptable. We cannot stress enough how difficult this process had been for so many Pennsylvanians as they try to navigate websites, confusing signup systems, understaffed phone lines, and confusing categories of prioritization. Although demand for vaccine still outweighs supply, we are counting on state officials to follow through on their recent pledge to do a better job ensuring that vaccines reach the arms of all eligible Pennsylvanians. With Pennsylvanians 50 years of age and older accounting for ninety-eight percent of all deaths from COVID-19, it is imperative that they - and all Pennsylvanians - receive clear information on what they can anticipate and when and where they may have the opportunity to receive the vaccine.

To help in this effort, in December 2020 AARP first published state-by-state guides to vaccine practices and rules for every state. Since this website went live on December 16th, our Pennsylvania specific guide has been updated nearly two dozen times to keep pace with the state's ever-evolving distribution plan ensuring that Pennsylvanians have the most up to date information on the who, what, when, where and why of COVID-19 vaccine information. The guide can be accessed at www.states.aarp.org/pennsylvania/covid-19-vaccine-distribution. Moreover, we recently hosted a statewide telephone town hall with Department of Health Secretary Alison Beam, which reached over 14,000 Pennsylvanians; and beginning tomorrow, we are hosting a series of six locally based telephone town halls. Specific to each local event, participating special guests will be trusted, local officials from the Allentown and Bethlehem Health Bureaus and local officials from Bucks,

Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia. AARP is committed to continuing to explore and implement practical and creative ways to inform and assist our members and all older Pennsylvanians to find a vaccine provider and make an appointment. Simultaneously, we are also in regular communication with the Wolf Administration about our members' concerns, including ways the state can improve its current vaccine distribution infrastructure and expanding options for individuals to receive a vaccine.

The State's recent acknowledgement that it needs to do better to help Pennsylvanians 65+ access the COVID-19 vaccine has been accompanied by improvements. We were pleased that some of our recommendations were considered and implemented as the state has moved to foster community-based solutions in its distribution efforts, including leveraging the skills of the commonwealth's aging network to help those who do not have access to the internet or do not have experience or support to use an online appointment system. Across the commonwealth, many local area agencies on aging and the state's PA Link to Aging and Disability Resources are providing guidance and support, along with assistance with scheduling a vaccine appointment and transportation to the vaccine clinic site. Moreover, the state's low-cost prescription assistance program – PACE – is also now being used as a resource to help PACE cardholders access the vaccine.

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, ethnicity, or zip code. At AARP, we believe that improving communication, collaboration, and coordination is key to improving confidence that the vaccine distribution process is transparent, equitable, fair and accessible. Thank you for your leadership in arranging this 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.