



Testimony of Department of Aging Secretary Robert Torres

House Aging & Older Adult Services Committee
Public Hearing on COVID-19 Vaccination Distribution for Older Adults
March 2, 2021

Chairman Day, Chairman Samuelson, and members of the House Aging and Older Adult Services committee, thank you for the opportunity to present on the Pennsylvania Department of Aging's efforts in support of older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic and during this current phase of vaccine administration. I appreciate the opportunity to update you and provide insight on the work that the Department and the Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) are undertaking to assist older adults in receiving their COVID-19 vaccinations.

The Department of Aging serves as the State Unit on Aging, charged with serving, protecting and advocating on behalf of all older Pennsylvanians. We oversee an array of benefits, services, and programs that are administered through a network of 52 local AAAs, which serve the commonwealth's 67 counties. These services and programs are intended to help older Pennsylvanians remain independent and to live and thrive in their homes and communities safely. The services include support such as home-delivered and congregate meals, caregiver support, health and wellness services, care management, personal assistance, senior community centers, Medicare enrollment counseling, transportation, job training, elder abuse prevention and protection, legal assistance, adult daily living centers and prescription assistance.

Pennsylvania's older adults have faced many challenges throughout this pandemic, and we recognize the current frustration and anxiety older adults, their family members and caregivers are experiencing as they try to navigate scheduling an appointment and await to receive a vaccine. Since the first case of COVID-19 was announced, the Department and AAAs have worked closely together to stay informed of the issues and to strategize on responses to help meet the needs of older adults. The Department, AAAs and community partners are responding to the latest challenge by providing older adults with vaccine information, rendering assistance to schedule an appointment and arranging transportation to the vaccine site when needed.

The Department has been and continues to be engaged in essential interagency vaccine discussions and planning. The AAAs are also working with community partners and their county and local governments on vaccine distribution planning efforts for their respective service areas. The AAAs and community partners are local, trusted supports and serve as integral component for reaching out and helping older adults to make this a successful vaccine rollout.

I am pleased to provide an overview of the vaccine initiatives the Department and the AAAs have implemented as we continue to work through the recovery phase of this pandemic.

The Department has created two options for older adults to receive assistance in locating a vaccine. First, our PACE/PACENET program, the country's only state-administered prescription benefit for seniors, has created a dedicated COVID-19 Special Scheduling Unit to assist its more than 275,000 enrollees in locating appointments for vaccination.

PACE staff have been working directly with cardholders to find open appointments, arrange transportation to vaccination sites, and will eventually work with PACE's pharmacy network members to vaccinate at a cardholder's residence, if necessary. PACE's clinical team is also working to identify any PACE member who is at high risk based on their medical history and will work with them to obtain vaccine appointments. By the middle of March, PACE will begin

providing similar assistance to individuals with disabilities and Pennsylvanians age 60 and older not enrolled in PACE.

The second option we are deploying is the PA Link to Aging and Disability Resources to support older adults and adults with disabilities who do not have access to a computer, internet or would prefer telephonic assistance. This service, which typically connects older adults and adults with disabilities to needed long-term services and supports, is available to assist individuals in researching appointments for a vaccine and providing transportation, if needed. Individuals may call the PA Link Call Center at 1-800-753-8827.

Recognizing that many older adults do not have access to the internet, the Department will continue to help address this need where we can. In addition, a recent Order of the Acting Secretary of the Department of Health requires vaccine providers to offer a telephonic option, with a live representative or agent, for vaccine appointments and information. This provision took effect February 19th and will be also helpful to many older adults.

The Department continues to meet with various stakeholders to explore collaborative opportunities and strategize on how we can mutually support each other to reach older adults interested in receiving a vaccine. These efforts include discussions with our sister agencies on how to directly connect vaccine providers with the most vulnerable older adults receiving aging services. A local hospital has reached out to the Department to discuss opportunities to coordinate scheduling vaccine appointments for older adults. Adult day centers and senior centers have shown interest in being vaccine sites when more supply is available, and we are in discussions with the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) on how to utilize their volunteer network. Various staff members and I are regularly meeting with the Governor's Office and the Department of Health and continue to participate in interagency workgroups to share information, identify issues, and develop solutions in order to ensure the needs of older adults and vulnerable populations are being considered and addressed as the vaccine rollout continues.

The Department's strongest partnership continues to be with the AAAs because of their trusted presence in communities across Pennsylvania. Depending on each agency's capacity and resources, they are providing connections and support in a variety of ways, such as:

- coordinating with their local health care providers, county government and emergency management agency;
- providing guidance and support to older adults and their families;
- assisting with scheduling;
- arranging transportation;
- offering senior centers to serve as vaccine clinics; and
- participating in county COVID-19 planning commissions.

Examples of some of the work AAAs have engaged in to support older adults include the following:

- Butler County AAA through a partnership with a local hospital has been able to help over 1,300 older adults schedule appointments and arrange transportation when needed.

- Southwestern PA AAA, which covers Washington, Fayette and Greene counties, has been able to assist older adults who are unable to schedule appointments online, and has been partnering with PennDOT's Shared Ride program to ensure a free ride for every older adult who needs transportation to their vaccination appointment.
- Lackawanna County AAA has partnered with a non-profit to provide caseworkers to help man a 211 hotline to support scheduling vaccine appointments for older adults. This partnership has helped more than 1,000 seniors since it was launched earlier this month. The caseworkers assist older adults by contacting the individual's preferred vaccine provider. The providers place the individual on lists for appointments and contact them when the vaccines are available.
- Montgomery County AAA has partnered with a software company at a low-cost to connect with the county's Office of Public Health to assist with pre-registering older adults to get vaccines. AAA staff, volunteers, Senior Community Center workers, and Health and Human Services employees are being utilized to answer the phones to pre-register seniors.

The Department, other state agencies, AAAs, stakeholders, and community partners are all working together to support older Pennsylvanians and ensure those who want to be vaccinated will be able to do so with appropriate support when needed. We will continue to support local planning efforts to position communities to be prepared to execute vaccine administration plans quickly when vaccine supplies increase. In conclusion, I thank the Older Adult Services Committee for inviting the Department of Aging to this hearing and I look forward to addressing any questions you may have.