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December 22, 2020

Rachel Levine, MD
Secretary of Health
625 Forster Street, 8th Floor West
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Secretary Levine:

Thank you so much for recording the interview with us this morning. Our physician leaders and members truly appreciate your ongoing collaboration, especially during this difficult time.

I want to expressly follow up regarding our members' concerns about the implementation of the Department of Health's (Department) COVID-19 Vaccination Plan (Plan), specifically as it relates to the vaccination of independent physicians and the health care providers in their offices we touched on today. Based on the Department's Plan, dated December 11, 2020, all health care personnel are to be vaccinated in Phase 1A, with sub-prioritization occurring if there is initially insufficient supply to cover all health care personnel. The Plan also states that the initial allocation of vaccine in Phase 1A will be distributed to hospitals, which will be responsible for vaccinating healthcare personnel, and the Pharmacy Partnership for Long-Term Care Program, which will be responsible for vaccinating residents and healthcare personnel who work in long-term care facilities, which you confirmed for us.

According to the COVID-19 Vaccine Hospital Decision Tool for Phase 1A (Appendix 8 in the Plan), each week, hospitals are to identify health care settings in the community that have not received a vaccine allocation and administer the vaccine to the health care personnel in those settings. It further instructs hospitals to proactively reach out to these health care settings through the local health care coalition (HCC) to inform independent providers of the hospital's responsibility to provide vaccine to them.

We shared that the Pennsylvania Medical Society (PAMED) has received a significant number of inquiries from independent physicians regarding their ability to get the vaccine. We have heard from members and staff who have contacted the HCCs and they have received no assistance.



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The HCCs have informed our staff and PAMED members that they are still working out details and do not have any information that they can share. Further, the HCCs are under the impression that private practice physicians get vaccinated through the CVS/Walgreens partnership. A PAMED member called the phone number listed on the Department's website for the HCC and the call was answered by an individual at the Hospital and Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania.

You confirmed awareness of this critical challenge and assured me that a plan was being created to address physicians and other healthcare workers outside of the hospital setting right now and that we would be the first to hear of the plan. Thank you for that.

While we understand the critical importance of vaccinating our frontline workers in the hospital setting, we strongly encourage you to quickly implement your plan to vaccinate our physicians and their staff who are not directly affiliated with a hospital as many of them are, too, seeing patients who have COVID-19 right now.

PAMED is asking that the Department address this issue as soon as possible. One way would be to establish an online portal where independent physicians and health care personnel can sign up to be vaccinated and that information could then be disseminated to the hospitals and HCCs. This will provide the hospitals and HCCs with the information they need regarding the physicians and health care personnel in their area that need vaccinated. Additionally, would it be possible to allocate some of the vaccine to the State Health Centers, so they could also serve as a vaccination site for independent physicians and health care personnel? I'm sure there are other options available as well. PAMED is less concerned about the mechanism itself, as long that it is easy for physicians and their staff members to use and results in them gaining access to vaccine.

PAMED continues to promote the message that it is safe for patients to go see their physician, they should continue with routine check-ups/disease management appointments, address issues with their physician to avoid having to go an already overwhelmed hospital system, etc.; however, we need to be able to get these physicians and personnel vaccinated in order to keep everyone safe so they can continue to treat their patients.

I appreciate your time and attention to this matter. PAMED stands ready to assist and partner to help you and the Department of Health ensure that all physicians secure the vaccine according to your Plan in a timely manner to safeguard the health of the citizens in the Commonwealth.

Sincerely,

Dr. Edward. P. Balaban, DO