

February 9, 2021

Alison Beam, Acting Secretary  
Pennsylvania Department of Health  
Health and Welfare Building  
8<sup>th</sup> Floor West; 625 Forster Street  
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Acting Secretary Beam,

We wish to thank you and your team for participating in last week's joint hearing of the Senate Aging & Youth and Health & Human Services Committees on the implementation of the state vaccination plan and for taking the time to talk with us today as a follow-up to some of the issues raised regarding long-term care facilities and our older population.

As discussed today, we as Chairs of the Senate Aging & Youth Committee are requesting that the department establish a working group (the "Aging Working Group") to specifically address issues of vaccinations facing Pennsylvania's seniors, including those in our long-term care facilities and independent living campuses, new staff hires and new residents of those communities and what reopening/visitation will look like in these facilities. We believe the Aging Working Group needs to include those providing housing and services to older adults such as representatives of the long-term care industry (i.e., LeadingAge Pa and Pennsylvania Health Care Association), senior-care partners such as county AAA's, organizers of the Retail Pharmacy Program, pharmacy providers, and legislators. While we are open to other agencies and groups such as the Department of Aging and PEMA being included, we want to ensure that the immediate priority of the Aging Working Group is vaccinating those in senior congregate care settings while also reviewing and making improvements to the Department's approach to

vaccinating seniors in Phase 1A who do not fall within that group.<sup>1</sup> The charge of the working group would be to expediently develop and execute a plan to vaccinate this critical population in the coming weeks, not months.

Sadly, in less than a year's time, more than 22,000 Pennsylvania's have died from COVID-19 and our seniors account for more than half of those deaths. As you know, long-term care facilities were a major contributor to those statistics. Recognizing that this virus has significantly impacted our most vulnerable citizens, it only stands to reason that our elder care facilities and other seniors should be a priority for receiving the vaccine. Unfortunately, the rollout to these facilities<sup>2</sup> and other seniors has been slow.

During the hearing you specifically mentioned looking for partnerships to help the Department improve the delivery of vaccines. Interestingly, long-term care groups have also expressed a desire to collaborate and this working group would help facilitate that goal. As a matter of fact, Adam Marles with LeadingAge PA indicated that they offered to help in December in developing a plan to ensure these facilities are a priority and they shared a plan with DOH to expedite vaccinations of seniors in congregate settings that incorporate several strategies but never heard anything. It is our understanding that they have repeatedly offered their support and collaboration to find solutions. We are urging the Department to collaborate with them – and us – via a working group so we can expedite delivery of vaccines to the residents and staff of these congregate care settings and, most importantly, send a loud and unified message to all of Pennsylvania's seniors that we have heard them and we want to do better by them.

Again, we respectfully request that the Department create a working group to collaborate with the long-term care industry, senior-care partners, and advocates to expedite the delivery of vaccines to our elderly population. Alternately or in addition, in light of the Governor's own announcement today about his formation of a vaccination joint task force, we ask that you advocate for us to join that task force, as a voice for Pennsylvania's 2.5 million seniors. To protect the overall health and welfare of our older Pennsylvanians, it's crucial that we do everything possible to get them vaccinated quickly. It only makes sense that long-term care

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<sup>1</sup> According to AARP Pennsylvania, citizens 50 and older have accounted for 98 percent of all deaths from COVID-19. We need to drastically improve the situation to make sure that the vaccination process is as smooth and easy as possible for our seniors and that they are a priority given that older adults are more susceptible to this deadly virus. Some of *but definitely not all* of the other issues pertaining to seniors that will need to be addressed by this working group are (1) methods of communication and overreliance on web-based technology; (2) the need to take advantage of existing infrastructures such as Meals on Wheels programs, faith-based organizations, and community settings; and (3) rebuilding trust in the process.

<sup>2</sup> As highlighted by the testimony of long-term care organizations during the February 4<sup>th</sup> hearing, they indicated that only 17 percent of the vaccine has been allocated to long-term care thus far. This statistic was calculated using data reported by the CDC at the following site: [CDC COVID Data Tracker](#).

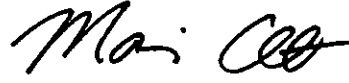
providers and those working directly with older Pennsylvanians, those who are on the frontline and know what works, be included in conversations and their suggestions be given serious consideration.

Thank you for your attention to these matters. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Judy Ward  
30<sup>th</sup> Senatorial District



Maria Collett  
12<sup>th</sup> Senatorial District

JW:ep  
Enclosure

CC: Senator Jake Corman, President Pro Tempore  
Senator Kim Ward, Majority Leader  
Senator Jay Costa, Minority Leader  
Senator Ryan Aument  
Senator Art Haywood