



Where is vaccine for Assisted Living staff and residents?

By Lisa Newcomb, Executive Director, Empire State Association of Assisted Living

From the earliest days of planning for the development and distribution of an efficacious COVID-19 vaccination, those working in our nation's congregate care settings for seniors, including assisted living communities, were prioritized as first in line to be vaccinated, and rightfully so: the population they serve has been universally identified as among the most vulnerable. In the first months of the pandemic, a common criticism was that there was not enough attention or resources given to long term care settings, including assisted living, and there was outsized attention paid to hospitals. Whether it be PPE, staffing or financial assistance, the hospitals were always first in line. Perhaps, to some extent, that was appropriate, but not to the detriment of other vulnerable sectors. That should have been a valuable lesson learned as adult care facilities/assisted living residences continue to suffer from a lack of resources and a potentially high incidence of COVID among the frailest of our seniors.

That's why we are baffled that now, weeks into the vaccination process, not one assisted living staff person or resident has received the vaccine. Yes, we understand that there is limited supply, and the decision has been made to vaccinate other populations first. But how is it that funeral directors, hospital discharge planners, firefighters and other frontline and congregate care setting staff have begun receiving the vaccine and assisted living workers serving very frail elderly residents have not? More shocking are recent reports that hospitals are hoarding the vaccine for all their staff and rejecting pleas to offer it to other critical health care workers in the community.

This is unconscionable and illogical considering the vulnerable resident population served. Assisted living residents and staff deserve better. Vaccines should be made available to staff immediately and residents as soon thereafter as the supply grows. Otherwise, the state unnecessarily risks a repeat of the large number of nursing home resident deaths that occurred in the beginning months of the pandemic.

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