



January 18, 2021

Dr. Mandy Cohen, Secretary  
NC Department of Health and Human Services  
2001 Mail Service Center  
Raleigh, NC 27699-2000

Dear Dr. Cohen,

On behalf of the North Carolina Coalition on Aging, we appreciate the NC Department of Health and Human Services (NC DHHS) tireless effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus and extend our gratitude for expanding “Group 2” to include North Carolinians age 65-74. We understand your goal is to vaccinate as many eligible citizens as possible given the limited supply of vaccines. We are empathetic that the rollout comes at a time when health systems and public health departments are under intense pressure and the rates of COVID-19 are at record highs.

Over the past week, seniors across the state have experienced long lines, quickly organized first-come/first-serve clinics, and appointments only accessible through Internet access and electronic medical record portals. This inconsistent approach has resulted in a great deal of frustration among many older adults. In addition, many at risk seniors have fallen through the cracks in their ability to get vaccinated because the systems in place have not been accommodating to their special needs. In North Carolina we have tens of thousands of residents over age 65 who are socially isolated, lack caregiver support, suffer from the digital divide, and have impediments to transportation.

More needs to be done to ensure all seniors in Group 2 have the opportunity to obtain access to the vaccine. It is our hope and expectation that in the coming days, we will see improved planning and inclusion of the most vulnerable seniors particularly as more supply becomes available. As a Coalition we request that the NC DHHS and its vaccination partners implement strategies to make sure a multiple faceted outreach process and needs-based system is used to make sure the most vulnerable, medically fragile and disadvantaged are not left out of the vaccination process.

We would like NC DHHS to improve equitable access to vaccines by ensuring:

- **Information, outreach, and enrollment is conducted through multiple communication methods and not solely through the Internet.** Health systems and health departments need to utilize and publish phone numbers in addition to email address and on-line sign ups.

- **Close coordination for registration and/or appointments with trusted community partners** such as councils on aging, meals on wheels programs, senior centers, faith communities, low-income senior housing, and other community providers serving minority and/or homebound older adults.
- **Mega sites are equipped to meet the unique needs of an aging population.** It is important to conduct events in ADA accessible buildings with adequate parking and seating. Locations should be able to accommodate caregivers and have onsite access to equipment such as walkers and wheelchairs.
- **Homebound seniors have access to vaccinations.** Not all seniors are able to get out of their homes to receive a vaccine. Participants served by publicly funded programs such as the Community Alternatives for Disabled Adult (CAP/DA) and Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE) live in community settings but qualify for nursing home care. Many of these program participants and other medically fragile community dwelling seniors can not physically leave their homes to get vaccinated. Health departments and hospital systems need to establish relationships with providers who can conduct in home vaccination for those who are home bound.
- **Family caregivers for homebound seniors, many of whom are over the age of 65, have access to vaccinations.** If the caregiver is exposed to or contracts COVID, there is often no one else available to care for the care recipient and this creates a crisis situation. In addition, because of the nature of their caregiving role, many caregivers cannot leave the home to get a shot.

We acknowledge that adequately serving our states senior population has challenges. We hope by working with existing aging service networks, faith communities, and family caregivers together we can make sure no older adult is left out of our state's vaccination rollout. By overcoming hurdles, we trust that North Carolina will be better prepared to vaccinate all older North Carolinians.

Please call on the North Carolina Coalition on Aging, if we may assist you in any way.

Sincerely,



Heather Burkhardt  
Executive Director

Cc: Tara Myers  
Joyce Massey-Smith