



TO: Secretary-Designee Andrea Palm, WI Department of Health Services  
FROM: Kathy Markeland, Executive Director  
DATE: December 28, 2020  
RE: Vaccine Access for Phase 1a Providers Unaffiliated with Health Care Systems

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On behalf of the members of the Wisconsin Association of Family & Children's Agencies, thank you for the tireless and compassionate work of your dedicated team at DHS throughout this very challenging time. With vaccine distribution underway, we are reaching out to offer our support and seek your guidance regarding strategies to help our workforce and our clients access vaccination in accordance with the state priorities outlined by the State Disaster Medical Advisory Committee (SDMAC) .

WAFCA is a statewide association that represents over forty child and family serving agencies that support more than 225,000 individuals and families each year. Our members' services include foster care and adoption programs; shelter care facilities, group homes, and residential care centers; crisis intervention; outpatient mental health therapy; and individual, family and group counseling, and in-home services/supports to parents, among others. In all program areas, our member agencies are responsible for the health and safety of the individuals they serve, along with supporting the dedicated staff who carry out agency missions.

We have watched with interest as our health partners through the SDMAC have deliberated on the appropriate criteria and phasing for the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines. We are grateful that their final Phase 1a guidance incorporates many of the health care roles and functions provided through our member community-based agencies. In fact, as we read the Phase 1a guidance, it is our understanding that many of our community-based behavioral health staff, our congregate care workers serving youth in residential and group home settings, as well as our other in-home providers, such as case managers and foster care workers, qualify for vaccination during this first phase.

We are also aware that the vaccine distribution plan is still under development for Phase 1a staff in organizations and entities that are "unaffiliated" with a health care system. Given the independent and dispersed nature of our community-based provider agencies, we are eager to assist the state in facilitating clear communications regarding timing, prioritization and access to vaccinations for our members. We invite you to use our WAFCA network as a conduit for sharing the latest updates on distribution schedules and offer our expertise in community-based services as you formulate specific vaccinator plans.

Throughout the pandemic, our community-based agencies have engaged in significant self-advocacy with local public health entities. We understand that our local public health officials have been stretched beyond capacity. Overall we have found them to be responsive and compassionate in working with community-based organizations. However, the services provided through our members do not fall into program areas that are immediately familiar to those in health care and we have found that local public health officials do not always recognize our staff as “essential workforce.”

Simply stated, our experience throughout the pandemic has taught us that our essential health care workers in community-based settings are at risk of being overlooked. We are asking that the Department make a concerted effort to engage with community-based providers as the vaccine continues to roll out statewide and that there be a proactive communication strategy to reach our “unaffiliated” organizations so that they are informed and appropriately offered timely vaccine access in alignment with the guidance developed for Phase 1a by the SDMAC.

We look forward to your response and to providing whatever information and assistance necessary to help the Department align vaccine distribution with the careful criteria outlined by our state and federal health advisors.

Thank you, again, for your leadership and we look forward to our continued partnership through this next stage of the public health emergency.

cc: Lisa Olson, Assistant Deputy Secretary