Governor Mills Updates Maine's Vaccine Strategy to Focus on Protecting Those Most Vulnerable to COVID-19

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In conjunction with DHHS & Maine CDC, Governor Mills focuses limited vaccine supply on older Mainers and those with high-risk medical conditions who are more likely to become seriously ill or die from COVID-19

Governor Janet Mills today announced updates to Maine's strategy for distributing its limited allocation of COVID-19 vaccines targeted toward preventing serious illness and saving the lives of Maine people.

The Governor, in consultation with the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Maine CDC), is dedicating the limited vaccine supply to older Maine residents, beginning with those 70 and older; additional emergency service personnel such as police and firefighters; and people who support infrastructure critical to Maine's COVID-19 response. The updated strategy also focuses on adults of all ages with high-risk medical conditions that place them at greater risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19.

When taken in combination with the vaccinations already given to medical providers and residents and staff of long-term care facilities, these updates accomplish two goals: 1) to save lives by focusing on Maine people who are at greater risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19; and 2) to further protect and ensure the continuity of emergency response services and COVID-19 response infrastructure on which Maine people rely.

New recommendations announced yesterday by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services appear to align with Maine's goal to vaccinate people most vulnerable to COVID-19 as quickly as possible. Maine is acting to implement its strategy, which is tailored to meet the unique needs of the state's population, as it awaits further details on the federal government's recommendations.

> *"As we distribute the vaccine and adapt our strategy to meet Maine's needs, my fundamental goal is to save lives. Maine is predominantly an older state, and we have a large number of people with high-risk medical conditions. These folks are exactly who face the greatest risks from the virus,"* ***said Governor Janet Mills****. "Given they are at a greater risk of serious illness or death, it is appropriate to first target the limited supply of vaccine Maine receives to that population."*
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> *"We continue to adjust our COVID-19 vaccination strategy to best protect the lives and health of Maine people with the limited doses available,"* ***said DHHS Commissioner Jeanne Lambrew.*** *"As we work with our partners to expand access to this life-saving vaccine as quickly as possible, we urge Maine people to stick to the prevention steps we can all take now to limit the spread of the virus."*
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> *"As our vaccination efforts expand to include more at-risk Maine people, velocity and equity continue to guide our planning,"* ***said Dr. Nirav D. Shah, Director of the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention.*** *"As we await information from our federal partners on how quickly they can provide the vaccine needed for this next phase, we recommend that Maine people continue to wear face masks in public, stay at least 6 feet apart, and avoid non-essential gatherings with people who don't live with them."*

"Since the start of the pandemic, nearly 95 percent of the deaths from COVID-19 have been among people 50 and older," ***said AARP Maine State Director, Lori Parham****. "The data clearly shows that the older people are, the higher risk they face if they contract COVID-19. On behalf of our more than 200,000 members and their families in Maine, we thank the Governor for her leadership and look forward to working closely with her and her team to ensure older Mainers statewide have the latest information on how to access the vaccine quickly and safely. We urge the Federal Government to move quickly to distribute the necessary doses to Maine and every state so that older Americans get the protection they need from this deadly virus as soon as possible."*

Updates to Phase 1a: To date, Maine, like many other states, has closely followed the recommendations of the U.S. CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), which proposes vaccinating people in a phased-approach given the limited supply of COVID-19 vaccines. Maine is currently in Phase 1a of its vaccine distribution strategy, which is dedicated to protecting health care personnel, such as doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals like emergency medical technicians (EMTs), and residents of long-term care facilities. Beginning this week, Maine is updating Phase 1a to also include:

- **Other Emergency First Responders & Public Safety Personnel:** These individuals include, among others, firefighters, police and other law enforcement officers, as well as corrections officers. Vaccinating these personnel, along with already-vaccinated health care workers and other emergency first responders like EMTs, will ensure the continuity of emergency health and public safety services for Maine people.
- **Critical COVID-19 Response Personnel:** These individuals include people who manufacture, distribute, process, or report COVID-19 tests, whose work, if disrupted, would severely hamper the ability of Maine or the United States to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, this includes people who work in-person directly on COVID-19 response at Maine CDC, which spearheads the State's COVID-19 response, and private companies such as IDEXX, which supports Maine's COVID-19 testing capabilities; Abbott Laboratories, which manufactures COVID-19 tests for use in Maine and across the nation; Puritan Medical Products, which manufacturers swabs for COVID-19 tests; and The Jackson Laboratory, which is conducting whole genome sequencing to detect COVID-19 variants for Maine.

Personnel now added to Phase 1a can begin receiving vaccines this week. Maine aims to complete Phase 1a by February.

Updates to Phase 1b: Phase 1b is dedicated to protecting vulnerable residents and frontline workers. Maine is updating Phase 1b to include:

- **Older Mainers:** Maine will first focus in Phase 1b on vaccinating older Maine people, beginning with people age 70 and older because they are at greater risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19. In Maine, more than 85 percent of COVID-related deaths have been of people in that age range. The death rate for this age range is 10 percent of those who contract the virus compared to 1 percent for people in their 60s and less than one percent for all other ages. Further, the COVID-19 hospitalization rate in Maine for people age 70 and older is 17 percent, which is markedly higher than the six percent for people ages 60-69; the three percent for people ages 40 to 59, and the less than one percent for younger people. Approximately 193,000 Maine people are 70 or older, some of whom already qualify to be vaccinated in Phase 1a because they are in long-term care settings or are health care workers.

  Additional information on vaccination for people age 70 and older in Maine will be available the week of January 18. Older Mainers should wait to contact their health care providers about getting vaccinated. Maine's decision to initiate Phase 1b with older residents is in line with a growing number of states, such as Vermont and Texas, and also generally follows new recommendations from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). After a significant number of people 70 and older have been vaccinated, or if the supply of the vaccine increases, Maine will move to vaccinate those between the ages of 65-69, in line with yesterday's new Federal recommendations.
- **People with High-Risk Medical Conditions:** Medical evidence also demonstrates that COVID-19 presents a greater chance of serious illness, including hospitalization, admission to the ICU, intubation or mechanical ventilation, or death for those who have a high-risk medical condition. Maine will next focus in Phase 1b on these vulnerable individuals. Maine clinicians and experts in the coming weeks will review the U.S. CDC's list of underlying medical conditions that make it harder for people to recover from the virus. Depending on the size

of this to-be-determined subgroup, as well as the supply of vaccines, vaccinations may need to occur in stages, for example, starting with older high-risk people or people with two or more pre-existing conditions.

Phase 1b continues to include frontline workers, as recommended by the U.S. CDC's advisory group. Identifying these workers and determining how they will be vaccinated will occur as more information on the vaccine supply in the Biden Administration emerges. Should vaccine supply increase, Maine can more quickly vaccinate people whose work puts them at greater risk of contracting or transmitting COVID-19.

Maine's progress in vaccinating people in Phase 1a allows Phase 1b to begin this month. Maine aims to complete Phase 1b by April.

Updates to Phase 1c and Phase 2: Phase 1c will include other critical workers, while Phase 2 will include people ages 16 to 64 who are not otherwise eligible during a previous phase. These phases are planned for this spring and summer.

The Federal government is purchasing vaccines and distributing with only a week's notice a limited, unpredictable, and inconsistent supply to states for further distribution. To date, Maine has only received enough doses to vaccinate 7 percent of residents against COVID-19. For example, the allocation for next week (January 17-23) is 18,550, which is less than what Maine received the week of December 28.

Despite this short planning horizon and unpredictable, limited supply, Maine has worked hard to quickly distribute the vaccines it has. If the amount of vaccines administered and allocated to the retail pharmacy long-term care program, which is administered by the Federal government, is not taken into consideration, then 82 percent of the first doses of vaccines allocated to Maine have been given as shots in arms. To date, 53,511 people have gotten first doses, with 62,004 doses provided in total. 8,493 people have received both doses.

Adjusting for its population size, Maine ranks second lowest in the nation on total hospitalizations, third lowest on cases, and fourth lowest on deaths from COVID-19. Additionally, Maine continues to rank among the top twenty states on Moody's Analytics and CNN Business "Back-to-Normal Index".

Although vaccinations have begun, COVID-19 remains a serious public health crisis and Maine people should continue to heed all health and safety protocols, including wearing masks, staying home if you feel sick, practicing physical distancing, washing hands often, and avoiding gatherings.

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