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State recognizes the importance of vaccinating those with disabilities by recognizing Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month and World Down Syndrome Day

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JEFFERSON CITY, MO – The Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) and the Missouri Advisory Committee on Equitable COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution is hosting a Facebook event on Thursday, March 18 beginning at 11:30 a.m., to celebrate Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month (March) and World Down Syndrome Day (March 21).

As part of the vaccination planning that began last summer, the State of Missouri was tasked with establishing priority groups for COVID-19 vaccination due to limited vaccine supply. Those with intellectual and developmental disabilities like Down syndrome, as well as their in-home caregivers, were prioritized for vaccination in Missouri due to the high risk for severe outcomes if infected with COVID-19.

"Protecting our most vulnerable has always been at the forefront of our response to this public health emergency," said Dr. Randall Williams, DHSS Director. "We continue to ensure that every Missourian who wants the COVID-19 vaccine is able to receive one."

March 2021 marks the 34th anniversary of Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month. When President Reagan made the first presidential proclamation in March of 1987, it aimed to increase public awareness of the needs and the potential of Americans with developmental disabilities, and called upon all Americans to provide the encouragement and opportunities necessary for people with developmental disabilities to reach their potential.

Another important awareness event that occurs each March and one that is closely connected to the developmental disabilities community, is World Down Syndrome Day. The date for World Down Syndrome Day being the 21st day of the third month was selected to signify the uniqueness of the triplication (trisomy) of the twenty-first chromosome, which causes Down syndrome. World Down Syndrome Day seeks to amplify the voice of those living with Down syndrome by way of increasing public awareness, encouraging advocacy and strengthening alliances.

The **Facebook event (https://www.facebook.com/HealthyLivingMo/)** today is part of the "Including People with Disabilities in Missouri's Vaccine Equity Campaign" and will include Williams, advocates Todd and Elijah Mayfield, and Missouri Advisory Committee on Equitable COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Co-Chair and Special Advisor Sara Hart Weir.

Weir has a personal connection to the Down syndrome community, is the former CEO of the National Down Syndrome Society and is now advising the state of Missouri on its equitable distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine.

"COVID-19 continues to present significant health risks to individuals with Down syndrome and other disabilities as well as their families and caregivers," said Weir. "It is vitally important that we continue to ensure people with disabilities are included in all aspects of the state's plan and response. The month of March presents a unique opportunity to educate Missourians that individuals with disabilities (and their caregivers) are both currently eligible to access the COVID-19 vaccine."

The Elijah and Todd Mayfield will also be special guests today at the Missouri Advisory Committee on Equitable COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution **meeting at 1 p.m. (https://health.mo.gov/information/publicnotices/meetings.php)**

"We have been one of the leading states for several weeks for having the lowest new case growth rate in the country," said Williams. "I believe that it is because of leaders like Elijah who are so other-centered in their actions that have helped us to get to where we are in Missouri now."

Governor Parson issued a proclamation recognizing World Down Syndrome Day and will also be releasing a video message through social media.

Many people with disabilities have diabetes, cancer, heart disease, or obesity. These conditions put individuals at higher risk of severe illness due to COVID-19. **Down syndrome (https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/downsyndrome.html)** is one condition that may put one at higher risk of getting very sick from COVID-19. Conditions are added when there is enough scientific evidence to support putting them on the high-risk list.

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Note: An ASL interpreter will be available for the Facebook event on March 18.

Photo: Elijah Mayfield has now received both doses of his COVID-19 vaccine. (https://health.mo.gov/information/news/img/3-18-21-photo.jpg)

About the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services: The department seeks to be the leader in protecting health and keeping people safe. More information about DHSS can be found at **http://health.mo.gov (http://www.health.mo.gov/)** or find us on **Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/HealthyLivingMo/)** and **Twitter (https://twitter.com/healthylivingmo)** @HealthyLivingMo

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