

February 10, 2021

Marylou Sudders, MSW, ACSW
Secretary, Health and Human Services
Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services
1 Ashburton Place, 11th Floor
Boston, Massachusetts 02108
Via email: marylou.sudders@state.ma.us

CC: Governor Charlie Baker
CC: Monica Bharel, MD, MPH, Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health

Dear Secretary Sudders:

We write to you as union leaders who represent more than 150,000 educators and other school and college employees, firefighters and library workers to strongly urge you to support the Last Mile Vaccine Delivery Proposal, which is currently before the state Department of Public Health. We strongly urge you to support this program.

This proposal is a union-led effort to facilitate the rapid vaccination of all school employees in their districts so that more students can return safely to in-person learning as soon as possible. We propose first rolling this out in low-income communities of color that have high COVID-19 transmission rates. Students and families in these communities have been hit especially hard by the pandemic.

Getting students who need in-person learning back to school safely is an issue of equity. The education of our students, preK through college, has been badly disrupted by COVID-19. Hundreds of thousands of students are being taught remotely some or all of the time, some with great success while others continue to struggle. And while no child and family is left untouched by COVID-19, the disparate impact of the coronavirus on people of color is mirrored in their schools.

The reality is that thousands of educators, school and college employees and students are already teaching and learning in person without full protection. Vaccination would not solve all of the health concerns, but it would keep educators, their students and their communities safer.

A plan is needed — and we have one. Right now, there is no state-approved plan for how to vaccinate school employees. Massachusetts is lagging behind other states. [More than half of all states](#) have already begun vaccinating school staff, and other states plan to start soon. These states are adhering closely to the current [CDC recommendation](#) that educators be vaccinated early, along with other frontline essential workers, such as firefighters, police officers and postal service employees.

We are not asking to “jump the line.” We believed that it was reasonable to place educators in Phase 2, although it should apply to all educators, including those in higher education. Everyone in Phase 2 has a compelling case for prioritization. Many of the elderly people in Phase 2 are our relatives, friends and neighbors, and many are the grandparents and caretakers of the children we educate.

We are not asking to be moved ahead of them. Just as the state is moving forward with a plan to vaccinate [public transit workers](#), we also need a plan to vaccinate all educators. We are asking the state to set aside enough vaccine from the supply currently being stored in freezers to pilot our program in 10 to 20 high-need school districts *at the same time* the state is continuing to vaccinate people aged 65 through 74. As more vaccine becomes available, the program would be scaled up to administer shots to school staff across the state as quickly as possible, especially for those who are working in person or will be soon.

We are concerned that higher education faculty and staff and public library staff — many of whom are also already working in person on campuses and in libraries — are poorly served by the state’s plan. In [32 other states, higher education employees are included with school employees](#). In Massachusetts, they are with the “general public” in Phase 3, with no plan for when or how they will be vaccinated. They should be prioritized with school employees and could easily be integrated into the Last Mile Vaccine Delivery program in their communities, as well as on their own campuses. The urgency of this case was reinforced just days ago when UMass Amherst announced new restrictions in response to an explosion of infections on campus.

Our plan brings the vaccine to people. Distribution challenges are part of the reason [Massachusetts lags behind most states](#) in the percentage of vaccine doses administered and the share of the population already vaccinated. Our plan would help by bringing the vaccine to our communities. In a test run in Quincy and Chelsea last Friday, Brewster Ambulance EMTs administered the shots while local firefighters stood by to provide assistance should anyone experience an adverse effect. It went very smoothly. This trial run, and a similar program developed by and for first responders during Phase 1, showed us that the system works.

The Professional Fire Fighters of Massachusetts approached the Massachusetts Teachers Association and AFT Massachusetts to collaborate on this proposal because we know the benefits of vaccinating school employees locally and efficiently. Many firefighters and EMTs have children and know firsthand how important it is for them to be safer when they are back in school. As important, school employees need to know that the state is taking care of those who care for our children. Vaccines are a critically important part of the equation.

Mascon Medical leaders, who have been in discussion with the Department of Public Health, would lead the process of contracting with the personnel needed, identifying the sites and working with municipal partners to make the program successful. As in the pilot, the EMTs and firefighters would administer the vaccines and provide medical care, if needed. It would be a turnkey operation, taking the burden off of state and municipal leaders. This would save municipalities from having to reinvent the wheel in each community.

We are missing only one partner to make this work: the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. We urge you to approve our proposal for a pilot program to begin this month in a limited number of high-need communities. Criteria for the pilot would include having a high local coronavirus transmission rate and a large number of low-income students. We would then scale up to cover the state.

This is urgent. We strongly believe it is in the public interest for you to meet with us this week to discuss the program further and finalize details so that we can immediately begin the process of making our schools safer for students, families and communities, along with Massachusetts educators.

Sincerely,

Merrie Najimy
President
Massachusetts Teachers Association

Beth Kontos
President
American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts

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