

N.Y.S. Gets D-(isability) On Vaccine Rollout

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New York's vaccination process started typically, with confusion, no clear instructions, a chaotic distribution network and an inadequate supply of vaccine.

However, the important part of the vaccination rollout was that our front-line workers, doctors, nurses, EMS and their supporting staff were scheduled to be the first in line to receive the vaccine. Rightfully so, as they left their homes, traveling in most cases in public transportation to take care of individuals who are sick and exposed with this deadly virus. These are the same workers that we cheered for every day at 7 p.m. sharp to help uplift them during the darkest days of the pandemic.

This was followed by vaccinating seniors 65 and older. Again this makes logical sense because, this was the population that was more susceptible to the devastating effects of COVID-19 and were more likely to die because of it. Then something started to happen and a pattern started to develop in my mind. The city was prioritizing those who come in contact with the general public like mass transit workers, airline and airport employees, police officers, those who protect and take care of individuals like correction officers, nursing home staff and home care workers and consumer directed personal care workers.

Although the state seemed to have been doing a great job at getting the vaccine to the masses there was a population that was being left out. A lot of people take for granted that they have technology available to them to be able to make appointments to get the vaccine or have a support system, to get their family members to and from these appointments. This is not the case for many seniors or people with disabilities and those with language barriers, who have been left out of the conversation.

Seniors and individuals with disabilities are more likely to be susceptible to COVID-19 effects and are more likely to live on fixed incomes. They do not have access to technology like internet, computers or smart devices and don't have the support system to help them navigate what is a very complicated vaccination enrollment process.

We kept waiting for weeks as family members and advocates pleaded with our government agencies to help us with this process. Only to be told that they cannot help and we should do the advocating for ourselves.

If the agencies that we are advocating to, who have the contact information to those whom we need to get in contact with and can easily start a dialogue with them cannot help us, then who can? All of our pleas and begging went unanswered or ignored, or we were told that we were asking the wrong agencies for help.

Where I started to really get upset is when our government made the vaccine available to restaurant workers, restaurant delivery drivers and for-hire vehicle drivers making it clear that it cared more about its economy than those who have already been isolated by society in general and now are even more isolated because of the fear of dying from COVID-19. Or maybe it is just ableism – believing that the able-bodied community are more worthy of the vaccine and can benefit more from being vaccinated.

Since the beginning of the vaccination rollout nonprofit organizations, hospitals and advocates have been asking, when is it going to be the turn of the most vulnerable – those with pre-existing conditions and those with disabilities? When are we finally going to be taken into consideration?

Maybe it is because we are not dying in large numbers or that our government feels that for-hire vehicle drivers are more important than we are. Or is it that because seniors and individuals with disabilities are already more likely to be isolated that we are already protected from the virus and do not need the vaccine?

I am a person who experienced a spinal cord injury and am classified as a quadriplegic with limited lung capacity and not a very good ability to cough. At the height of the pandemic, I lost one of my personal care attendants and came very close to being infected myself.

We do not realize how serious this virus is until someone near us dies. This is a reality that vulnerable individuals and those with disabilities who require home care face every day.

We are basically playing Russian Roulette. Although we may be isolating, we need help with the most basic of needs from people who are coming in and out of our homes. How do we protect ourselves when the virus comes to us?

Finally, beginning Feb. 15 the New York State government start handing out vaccination appointments to those in the vulnerable classes. Maybe as a direct response to the outcries for help or maybe realizing that they prioritized ableism and the economy over the vulnerable.

It is unfortunate, that individuals with disabilities and those in the vulnerable class are usually the first targets of governmental cuts and usually the last to be considered for anything beneficial.

Therefore New York State gets a D-(isability) for its vaccine rollout.