

Access to COVID-19 Vaccines MUST Be Accessible To Everyone

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A woman went to her appointment at a New York City High School. In order to get to the vaccination site, she had to climb a flight of steps. But she is a wheelchair user. She asked for an accessible entrance or for the vaccine worker to bring the vaccine to her. She was turned away instead. She is not the only one.

New York City has work to do if it wants to reach people with disabilities and underlying medical conditions who are at high risk for contracting COVID-19. There are many barriers that result in less access for people with disabilities to the vaccine.

The Office of Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has now published guidance outlining key actions that must be taken to prevent and cure discrimination against people with disabilities. We are determined to dismantle barriers to vaccination access.

COVID-19 has hit our community like a hammer. We are three times more likely than people with no disabilities to have heart disease, hypertension, diabetes or cancer – all of which place us at high risk. We have significantly higher rates of obesity (+57 percent) than non-disabled counterparts. People with developmental and behavioral disorders, schizophrenia, spinal cord injuries and immune suppression are also at high risk of contracting COVID-19 and having more serious symptoms and a higher risk of dying.

Then there are other factors that increase COVID-19 risk. Data from the American Community Survey shows that people with disabilities are far more likely to be poor on a long-term basis. Many are unable to leave home, have aides that see multiple clients or live in institutional settings where the virus has spread wildly. Additionally, more than 60 percent of homeless people have disabilities.

People are forced to make appointments for vaccinations without being able to ask for reasonable accommodations they need in order to be vaccinated. People need help in making appointments sometimes. Vaccine locations are sometimes inaccessible. Individuals are not told about their right to accommodations under the law. People need large print, ASL interpreters, accessible locations, the ability to bring aides with them, to reduce waiting times and more. The City does not put vaccination sites in buildings where people with disabilities live in large numbers.

We have a responsibility to the disability community to ensure that vaccine distribution is equitable and that this pandemic doesn't further entrench health disparities. It is critical that we follow the law, remove barriers and provide reasonable accommodations such as, but not limited to:

- Access to interpreters and captioning on informational videos;
- Training materials for providers explicitly addressing concerns of the disability community;
- Large print and alternate format materials;
- Accessible vaccination websites and appointments (with alternatives for those who lack access to technology); and
- Signage at sites reminding those who need help to ask for accommodations, with explanations on how to get one and where to complain if we can't.

Another essential part of the vaccine effort must be home visits for people who are unable to go out. CIDNY's advocacy has resulted in some seniors' buildings being designated as vaccination sites. A home-visit program was initiated as a result of our advocacy efforts, however it has been shut down due to problems with the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. Still people need home visits.

A wise colleague once told me that disasters are inclusive, but disaster response isn't – unless we plan for it. As the vaccine roll-out expands, the time to plan for our friends, neighbors and family with disabilities is now.

Another version of this article appeared in the United Hospital Fund newsletter.