



Department of Health

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Dear Colleagues:

It is hard to believe that we are approaching the last month of what has been an incredibly difficult and cataclysmic year. Although emotionally it is a relief to reach the end of the year, we are entering perhaps the most precarious phase of the fight against COVID-19. Recent news of at least three promising vaccines means we are finally closing in on resolution to this crisis. Nationally, however, COVID infections are raging, setting record numbers of cases and hospitalizations with each passing day. The people of New York have done a remarkable job at keeping transmission rates low in our state, but cases have nonetheless doubled in the first three weeks of November, and this is before we know the epidemiological fallout from Thanksgiving travel and gatherings.

Still, I am confident that New York State will successfully manage both external and internal threats while carrying out work of an unprecedented scale—ensuring the safety of FDA-approved COVID-19 vaccines and rapidly setting up a statewide distribution system to provide vaccinations to the majority of nearly 20 million residents. This month, I will discuss where we are in this work.

Preliminary Planning. In September, Governor Cuomo announced the formation of two independent task forces to advise New York State on vaccine rollout: the COVID-19 Clinical Advisory Task Force and the COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution and Implementation Task Force. The former group is comprised of leading scientists, doctors, and health experts who will review every COVID-19 vaccine authorized by the federal government; the latter of experts in public health, immunizations, government operations, data and other fields relevant to vaccine distribution and administration.

In October, the Department of Health released a draft [COVID-19 Vaccination Administration Program](#) that has guided our preliminary prioritization of vaccine recipients. Consulting with clinical and public health experts, we designed the draft program to be flexible, able to account for multiple variables and scenarios regarding vaccine availability, timeline for vaccine approval, delineation of federal and state responsibilities, funding, supply chain needs, and vaccination administration requirements. Implementation of this program requires collaboration and partnership with local departments of health, community partners and organizations, and of course the federal government.

COVID-19 Clinical Advisory Task Force. Members of this important body are advising the Department on COVID-19 vaccine safety profile, the implications of a vaccine being released under an FDA Emergency Use Authorization, legal authority to withhold vaccine, and clinical best practices if New York State must withhold or pause distribution of a vaccine.

Members will examine public information and the findings of expert third-party organizations to address any publicly reported concerns about the scientific process and rush to market.

Two important services performed by the Task Force will have direct implications for healthcare providers statewide. The group will enable the Department to provide more accurate information to all of you, who are often an individual's most trusted source of healthcare information. Their findings will help you more accurately discuss a vaccine's risks and benefits and clarify what ratings really mean. For instance, what does 95% efficacy mean for the potential recipient, and how do we best communicate this? How long will the immunity last? Will it vary among demographics? Will it prevent the cases that currently need hospitalization?

The important takeaway at this early point in the process is that the Clinical Advisory Task Force will not in any way delay access to safe and effective vaccines. It is, rather, a means of super-validation for New York State and the Department of Health, a stamp of approval to reassure New Yorkers that no corners were cut during the process of evaluating these brand-new vaccines.

COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution and Implementation Task Force. This group is advising the state on the vast distribution and administration operation that is needed to get safe and effective vaccines to all New Yorkers as quickly as efficiently as possible. The myriad of issues that must be addressed to have an effective and efficient COVID vaccination administration program include the prioritization of vaccine recipients, establishment of a distribution network capable of providing two doses of vaccine to all New Yorkers, ensuring that there are adequate numbers of qualified professionals and organizations to administer the vaccine, building a data and IT infrastructure for scheduling appointments and tracking program metrics, educating the public about the vaccination program, and procuring and deploying necessary supplies and equipment.

Rest assured that the Department will be undertaking aggressive outreach in the weeks and months ahead to inform you on all details of vaccine availability and how providers will gain access in the statewide program.

One Last Thing: I want to enlist your help in conveying to all New Yorkers the importance of taking extra care in celebrating this year's holiday season in ways that are safe and prevent the spread of COVID-19. The best approach is to honor your traditions with the people who live in your household and use socially distanced or virtual methods to connect with loved ones outside your household. This is the time to find new, creative ways to connect. One thing New Yorkers should not do this year is travel or invite others into your home. CDC guidance [reinforces this recommendation](#). And if travel from other states is absolutely necessary, travelers must comply with New York's [Travel Advisory](#).

Acknowledging that the coronavirus exploits our trust and love is a tough pill to swallow. By instinct, we form emotional safe zones, and instinct makes us believe these zones cannot be penetrated. We're less likely to take the same precautions against viral transmission with those we love. As trusted healthcare providers, you are in an ideal position to help patients understand that the individuals we are closest to emotionally and physically are the ones we're most likely to infect or be infected by. You can help people reorient their behaviors so that everyone remains safe.

We have come so far together in New York State in these challenging times, and I know we can make it across the finish line together. I have seen your strength, your compassion, and

your integrity. On behalf of the New York State Department of Health, thank you for keeping up this outstanding work throughout our historic fight against COVID-19.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Howard". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Howard A. Zucker, M.D., J.D.