



THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20201

The Honorable Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Casey:

Thank you for your letter regarding efforts to protect nursing home residents and staff from the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). I understand the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) briefed your staff on this topic on January 19, 2022.

COVID-19 vaccination, including booster and additional primary doses, remains critical for residents of nursing homes and healthcare staff. As of February 20, 2022, over 73 percent of residents and over 42 percent of staff in Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services-certified nursing homes have received a booster dose. The Department of Health and Human Services is working with other federal agencies, health departments, healthcare providers, professional organizations, and other public health partners to increase vaccine uptake and promote the use of boosters in this high-risk population.

Each week, every nursing home in the country submits vaccine coverage data to CDC's National Healthcare Safety Network. These data help us to see the impact of vaccine coverage and to better understand where to target vaccination efforts. While rates of infection among unvaccinated residents and residents with only a primary series are rising quickly, the rate of COVID-19 cases among residents with a booster dose is more than 10 times lower than these other groups.¹ I have provided additional information and answers to your questions in an enclosure.

Thank you for your letter and support as we work together to fight COVID-19. This response has been sent to the other signatories of your letter. If you have additional questions, please have your staff contact the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Legislation at (202) 690-7627.

Sincerely,

Xavier Becerra

¹ <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#vaccinations-nursing-homes>

Cc:

Hon. Michael F. Bennet
Hon. Mark Kelly
Hon. Ron Wyden

Enclosure

Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Answers to Questions Regarding Efforts to Protect Nursing Home Residents and Staff During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic and Spread of the Omicron Variant

1. What are the Biden administration's goals and associated timelines for rates of primary and booster doses of the COVID-19 vaccine among nursing home residents and workers in 2022? What steps are the Biden Administration taking to ensure that nursing home residents and workers have access to booster shots?

The federal government is committed to ensuring that residents and staff in long-term care facilities (LTCFs), such as nursing homes, assisted living, residential care communities, group homes, and senior housing, have access to COVID-19 vaccines. All LTCFs that request assistance administering COVID-19 vaccines to their residents and staff are paired with a retail pharmacy partner or public health department to assist. Long-term care (LTC) providers are encouraged to consider the option that works best for their residents and staff when coordinating access to COVID-19 vaccines, either in the local community or on-site.²

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is supporting states and jurisdictions to increase vaccine confidence and uptake among people at high risk of infection or severe COVID-19 illness through confidence consults to help troubleshoot and support vaccine confidence promotion efforts. These consults are conducted by CDC and other federal government staff with expertise on vaccine confidence, including those with experience in health equity and outreach to people from racial and ethnic minority groups and faith communities. Additional support is offered through technical assistance, on-site strike teams, and the Rapid Community Assessment, a tool designed for use by states and jurisdictions to diagnose and address barriers to vaccine confidence or uptake in specific communities.

CDC also developed educational materials for LTCFs, including trainings such as the National Nursing Home Training Series and the Nursing Home Infection Preventionist Training Course.³ In addition, CDC provided recommendations for families of LTCF residents to prevent the spread of COVID-19 during holidays when visits were likely to increase and residents often temporarily leave facilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the importance of healthcare infection prevention and control in keeping Americans—especially populations at high risk of severe COVID-19 illness—safe and healthy. CDC is using American Rescue Plan (ARP) funding to expand efforts that protect Americans from COVID-19 infections and other emerging infectious diseases across healthcare settings, specifically LTCFs and nursing homes. For example, over the next three years, CDC will issue awards totaling \$1.25 billion to 64 state, local, and territorial health departments to support this work. Initial awards totaling \$885 million were made in October 2021 to 64 health departments, including \$500 million to support state-based COVID-19 nursing home and other LTC

² <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/long-term-care/pharmacy-partnerships.html>

³ <https://qioprogram.org/cms-cdc-fundamentals-covid-19-prevention-nursing-home-management>

strike teams. The state-based nursing home and other LTC strike teams will allow state, local, and territorial jurisdictions to provide surge capacity to facilities for clinical services; address staffing shortages at facilities; and strengthen infection prevention and control activities to prevent, detect, and contain outbreaks of COVID-19, including support for COVID-19 vaccine boosters. ARP funding is also supporting CDC's Project Firstline,⁴ which aims to meet the various education needs of the diverse healthcare workforce; ensure they have the knowledge they need to protect themselves, their coworkers, and their patients; and develop training and education that addresses disparities across U.S. healthcare personnel.

In addition, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) provides direct support to nursing home residents through the Quality Innovation Network-Quality Improvement Organizations (QIN-QIO) using a data-driven approach to target nursing homes with low vaccination rates as self-reported to the CDC's National Healthcare Safety Network (NHSN). The QIN-QIOs work directly with these nursing homes to educate nursing home management, staff, and residents on the safety and importance of COVID-19 vaccinations. They also meet with resident councils, including family members, to provide education to help influence residents to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

In January 2022, QIN-QIOs were directed to conduct an aggressive educational and assistance campaign for referred nursing homes that CMS identifies through NHSN to have low resident and/or staff COVID-19 vaccination/booster rates. The QIN-QIO activities include rapid coordination of mobile/onsite vaccine clinics to provide COVID-19 vaccines to residents and staff and work with nursing home leadership to develop plans to address issues with vaccine uptake.

- 2. Researchers have shown that people of color are more likely to live in nursing homes that have low primary vaccination rates, and have a disproportionately low uptake of booster doses in the general population. What steps is the Biden administration taking to ensure that rates of primary and booster doses are equitable in nursing homes, and that communities of color and other populations disproportionately affected by the pandemic will have ready access to these vaccines?**

Health equity is an essential component of public health, and the Administration is committed to expanding evidence-based approaches to reduce disparities among people disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, including racial and ethnic minority groups in nursing homes. In 2020, CDC launched the *Partnering for Vaccine Equity* program focused on increasing equity in adult immunization. The program provides over \$156 million in funding and support to national, state, local, and community-level partners who are prioritizing equity in vaccination access and uptake for groups that experience disparities in immunization. These include racial and ethnic minority groups, individuals living with disabilities, rural communities, older adults, individuals with chronic conditions, and more.

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/infectioncontrol/projectfirstline/index.html>

CDC is paving the way in vaccine equity efforts with national, state, tribal, territorial, local, and community partners to ensure that Black or African American people, Hispanic or Latino people, and other groups disproportionately affected by COVID-19 have fair and just access to COVID-19 vaccination. To support vaccine equity, CDC continues to communicate with and listen to all communities affected by the pandemic. CDC is working to build trust, increase collaboration, and create tools and resources to respond to the concerns and feedback from these communities, especially those disproportionately impacted. These activities, along with messages supported by science, can help to increase COVID-19 vaccine acceptance.

3. How is the Biden administration seeking to increase primary vaccination rates and booster doses in nursing homes located in rural areas where uptake has tended to be relatively low?

The federal government is committed to ensuring that residents and staff in LTC settings, such as nursing homes, assisted living, residential care communities, group homes, and senior housing, have access to COVID-19 vaccines to receive primary series and booster shots.

The Federal Retail Pharmacy Program for COVID-19 vaccination is one part of the federal government's strategy to expand access to COVID-19 vaccines for the American public.⁵ Pharmacies are readily accessible in communities, with most Americans living within five miles of a pharmacy. Recognizing this, the federal government made them a key part of its COVID-19 vaccination strategy. As of January 12, 2022, more than 215.9 million doses have been administered and reported by retail pharmacies across programs in the United States, which includes 8 million doses administered onsite to LTCFs in the early days of the vaccination program.

In December 2021, CDC and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) worked together to provide more public data on the uptake of additional primary or booster COVID-19 vaccinations in nursing homes from CDC's NHSN. CDC now publicly posts weekly national and state NHSN data on resident and staff additional primary and booster doses¹ and CMS publicly reports facility-level data.⁶ These data allow CDC, CMS, and other federal agencies, health departments, and other public health partners to determine which regions, states, and facilities have the lowest vaccination rates and may need additional assistance in accessing vaccines or educating staff and residents about the importance of vaccination, including booster doses.

LTC administrators and managers in rural locations are encouraged to contact their LTC pharmacy, a retail pharmacy, or other vaccination provider to arrange for a vaccination clinic at their location. LTC settings having difficulties arranging COVID-19 vaccinations for residents and staff should contact their state or local health department's

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/retail-pharmacy-program/index.html>

⁶ <https://data.cms.gov/covid-19/covid-19-nursing-home-data>

immunization program for assistance. A health department may be able to arrange an on-site vaccination clinic on their behalf.

We note that CMS issued emergency regulations that require all nursing homes to educate residents and staff on the benefits of COVID-19 vaccines, including additional (i.e., booster) doses, and to offer vaccinations to residents and staff. Furthermore, CMS requires all staff to be fully vaccinated. While these requirements target all nursing homes, we believe they have been instrumental in increasing primary vaccination rates and booster doses in nursing homes located in rural areas.

4. Please provide information about any supply chain issues, staffing shortages, or other obstacles that the Biden administration has observed as it relates to facilities obtaining or administering additional primary or booster doses. To the extent such problems exist, how is the administration addressing them?

CDC's NHSN systematically collects data from all CMS-certified nursing homes on supply and staffing shortages. Facilities are required to provide information on whether they need government assistance for COVID-19 vaccine access and if they would like outreach from their local government, and whether they have critical staffing shortages. Data reported in response to these questions are shared with state health departments and CMS on a weekly basis to identify facilities that need to be prioritized for vaccine access or other assistance.

5. Please outline the steps that HHS is taking to ensure that residents, workers, their families and the public have an accurate and timely view of the pace that additional primary and booster doses of COVID-19 vaccines are being administered in nursing homes.

As noted previously, CDC publicly posts weekly national and state NHSN data on resident and staff additional primary and booster doses, and CMS publicly reports facility-level data provided by CDC from NHSN. CDC also works with LTC professional associations to increase educational efforts around the importance of vaccination and booster doses.

In addition, CMS now posts data on COVID-19 vaccine booster shots administered to nursing home residents and staff on the Medicare.gov "Care Compare" website.⁷ The data show resident and staff booster rates at the facility level and include national and state averages. Consumers can select any facility and scroll down to see this information and compare rates between facilities. We believe this provides more information to support consumers' and residents' decisions, while also incentivizing facilities to increase their rates.

HHS operating divisions meet multiple times each week to review COVID-19 data from nursing homes and the latest science on COVID-19. We use that data and science to inform what can be done to help keep residents and staff safe while providing the care

⁷ <https://www.medicare.gov/care-compare/>

that residents need. For example, CMS and CDC recently released information on how residents can have visits from their loved ones in ways that will keep everyone in the facility safe.^{8,9} We are working with partners in both public health and the LTC community to learn more about effective approaches that can be shared more broadly and replicated. We continue to support state and local health departments in their efforts to support nursing homes on the front lines. Additionally, we continue to work with partners to highlight the importance of vaccinations, with a particular focus on booster doses, including hosting multiple town hall meetings in the last few weeks.

⁸ <https://www.cms.gov/files/document/nursing-home-visitation-faq-1223.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.cms.gov/files/document/how-safely-visit-nursing-homes.pdf>