

August 26, 2021

The Honorable Kate Brown
900 Court Street NE, Suite 254
Salem, OR 97301-4047

RE: Booster Plan for Older Oregonians

Dear Governor Brown:

On behalf of Oregonians 65 and older, we urge your administration to immediately create--and share--a plan to deliver booster vaccinations to those who will benefit most and who have borne the heaviest costs. Older adults 50 and up continue to make up 95% of the deaths from COVID-19.

Older Oregonians are diverse. Quickly and effectively reaching them with the booster will take focused and determined efforts at all levels. Fifty-seven percent of older Oregonians live in rural places and are isolated by geography, scant services and pervasive skepticism about the vaccine. Intersections of ethnicity, culture and LGBTQ identities bring additional complexities to their profiles.

Fundamental to a better outcome is a comprehensive roll-out plan that communicates clear information to the public, eliminates over-reliance on technology to learn about and access the booster, and prioritizes those who are homebound, living in congregate settings and BIPOC communities.

We can all learn from the patchy rollout of vaccines earlier this year. Older Oregonians were not prioritized at first, and once they were, they had difficulty accessing or navigating the online system, called into poorly staffed hotlines, and were left confused, frustrated, angry and fearful. Still others who were homebound or in adult foster care were left for weeks without an option to get vaccinated. Now that supply is no longer an issue, these problems cannot be repeated.

Therefore, we urge you to:

1. Prioritize booster rollouts based on who is most at risk of significant illness and death. This must include prioritizing people 65 and older, especially those living in congregate settings.

2. Provide local health departments with additional resources and technical assistance that incorporates an aging lens into their rollout strategies such as more phone support, direct mail, mobile vaccines and canvassers.
3. Develop a public education campaign as soon as possible that uses traditional media channels and does not rely on social media or internet access.
4. Partner with local, trusted community groups and CBO's that engage regularly with older adults such as senior centers, meal sites, faith communities and culturally specific organizations.
5. Develop and fund specific strategies to reach homebound individuals, and other hard-to-reach populations to ensure boosters are delivered quickly and effectively. (The CDC has provided guidance on vaccinating homebound individuals and their caregivers, and federal funding may be available from FEMA and the American Rescue Plan Act to facilitate vaccinations for homebound individuals. This funding could be used to establish or improve systems to safely transport homebound people to vaccination sites or to bring the vaccine, including boosters, to the person's home.)

As you develop your plans, please lean on our expertise and networks in the field of aging. Throughout the pandemic, we've connected with thousands of older adults to bridge the digital and geographic divide. We are more than willing to share our learnings and contacts, including in rural communities, that have resulted from this work.

Our organizations stand ready to help in any way we can. Please contact us with any requests for assistance or questions you may have.

Sincerely,

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