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Friday, January 8, 2021

Dear Governor Pritzker and Mayor Lightfoot,

We are grateful that Illinois has been a leader in vaccinations. However, it is clear that we are not moving fast enough. In the first four weeks of the campaign, only 45,000 people across the state have been vaccinated. While vaccine deployment takes time, the rising death counts and the discovery of the potentially more contagious B.1.1.7 variant in the United States is a call to action to save lives as fast as we can. We are seeing high rates of vaccine hesitancy among healthcare workers, including those at hospitals and nursing homes. As a result, our hospitals have excess vaccines they could be administering to high risk individuals in phase 1B. In the absence of direction to move to phase 1B, some are vaccinating anyone they can, including individuals who are not patient-facing. Others are not using their vaccines awaiting further information. This has led President-Elect Joe Biden's team to state they plan to release nearly all available COVID-19 vaccines instead of holding back stock. We are encouraged by outreach from local and county health departments to vaccinate non-hospital affiliated frontline healthcare workers, including dentists and those at federally qualified health centers. We applaud the guidance to healthcare facilities to vaccinate anyone in phase 1A regardless of their affiliation. We support the move to include those that are age 65 or over in the next phase. However, to truly save lives, we must go faster.

We are calling for the following:

1. Enable and encourage healthcare facilities to overlap with 1A and progress to phase 1B to vaccinate high risk older patients and essential workers in the community. This will save more lives immediately. To avoid the chaos other states have seen when opening to 1B, one possibility is to use a lottery system and/or to create finer priority tiers. It is still better to move forward to this group even if the system is not perfect. The next tier will be large and the earlier we start the better.
2. Urgently address vaccine hesitancy among healthcare workers and those in phase 1A. Healthcare workers are members of the community. If they are rejecting the vaccine, we will face a much larger problem in subsequent phases in the community. Allowing high risk members and essential workers in the community to receive the vaccine will actually encourage those around them to receive it too. This could potentially assist with overcoming vaccine hesitancy at large, including in healthcare workers who are often waiting for more people to get it. Any effort to ensure this group that is offered the vaccine gets it will be informative for future phases.
3. Prepare for widespread distribution of the vaccine by training those in the community to serve as vaccinators and increase vaccine administration sites, particularly in areas of healthcare and pharmacy deserts which also have a disproportionate share of high risk individuals. This could include creating sites at colleges, community centers, and faith-based organizations, as well as enlisting EMS providers and other healthcare workers (e.g. pharmacy technicians, medical assistants, retired healthcare professionals).

Through urgent action, we can not only save lives but also improve vaccine acceptance in Illinois.

Sincerely,

IMPACT (Illinois Medical Professionals Action Collaborative Team)