

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

December 17, 2020

Alex M. Azar II
Secretary
U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services
Washington, DC 20201

Dr. Robert Redfield
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Atlanta, GA 30329

Maj. Gen. Christopher J. Sharpsten
Director of Supply and Distribution
Operation Warp Speed
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar, Director Redfield, and Maj. Gen. Sharpsten:

Thanks to the work of our remarkable scientists and the efforts of Operation Warp Speed, we are at a turning point in the COVID-19 pandemic as the first COVID-19 vaccines are being distributed across the country to inoculate our health care workers at the frontlines and people living in long-term care facilities. Despite these incredible achievements, our rural areas are facing unique challenges for vaccine distribution. We write today bring attention to these concerns and to urge Operation Warp Speed provide additional guidance and resources to state and local public health leaders in order to support timely and equitable vaccine access for people living in rural communities in Wisconsin and across the country.

COVID-19 remains a top issue of concern to our rural communities across America. People living in these communities are often older and more likely to be in worse health than people in other parts of the country, leaving them at greater risk for COVID-19. Access to health care was a challenge in rural areas prior to the pandemic. Over the last ten years, 124 rural hospitals have closed across the country. One in five rural hospitals are considered at risk of closure and 47% face negative operating margins. These circumstances will make it even more difficult to distribute COVID-19 vaccines to rural communities.

We have already heard from rural health care providers in Wisconsin about some of the unique challenges they face to deliver vaccines to people living in these communities. Identifying adequate ultra-cold storage capacity, ensuring vaccination sites are accessible, and securing staff to coordinate logistics and administer vaccines are leading concerns for vaccine distribution to our rural communities. Additionally, limited broadband access in rural areas could hinder vaccination data collection and reporting efforts through the CDC's Immunization Information System.¹

¹ <https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Supporting-an-Equitable-Distribution-of-COVID-19-Vaccine.pdf>

Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine, which is already being distributed and administered to eligible people across the country, poses unique challenges for rural communities. The vaccine must be stored in specialized ultra-cold freezers at -70 degrees Celsius and shipped specialized climate-controlled boxes with 975-doses of the vaccine. These shipping and storage requirements will be more difficult to follow in rural areas given the dispersed population and limited access to the ultra-cold freezers that can be used to preserve excess doses. These are just a few examples of the challenges we have heard in the very early stages of the vaccine deployment process. Rural communities should not be deprived of timely access to an authorized COVID-19 vaccine due to logistics challenges.

State and local health leaders in coordination with our health care providers have done tremendous work to put together plans to conduct COVID-19 vaccination campaigns at unprecedented scale and speed. These efforts will undoubtedly require additional resources.² As we move into future phases of the vaccine deployment, we urge you to mobilize Operation Warp Speed's resources and provide additional guidance to states to support vaccine distribution, especially in rural and underserved areas.

We applaud your work to develop a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine at an unprecedented speed. It is critical that no American is left behind as Operation Warp Speed's vaccine distribution continues and we remain willing and able to help ensure this. Our rural communities depend on it.

Sincerely,



Ron Kind
Member of Congress



Mike Gallagher
Member of Congress

² <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/states-are-getting-ready-to-distribute-covid-19-vaccines-what-do-their-plans-tell-us-so-far/>