

December 17, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Wilkie,

The distribution of the first doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, which is both safe and effective, is a decisive moment in the fight against this horrible virus. On December 15th, 2020 the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) released the VA COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Plan, outlining the order in which Veterans and VA employees would receive coronavirus vaccines as doses become available. As expected, the plan initially prioritizes frontline Healthcare Workers (HCWs) and the highest-risk Veterans. However, the plan does not outline when and how rural states like West Virginia will be incorporated into the prioritization.

The VA has now received its first 73,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine to be distributed to 37 hospitals within the VA. Not a single one of those first 37 hospitals are located in West Virginia, and I worry that the VA is not taking into account the unique health challenges West Virginia Veterans face. My office has learned that while the four Veterans Affairs Medical Centers (VAMCs) in West Virginia have been training, conducting exercises, and preparing to receive the vaccine, they have not been briefed by the VA Central Office (VACO) on a specific timeline for when to expect delivery. How will the VA ensure Veterans living in rural areas receive equitable access to a vaccine? I urge the Secretary to immediately make public any plans to prioritize rural Veterans and publish a specific timeline for when West Virginia Veterans can expect to see the first doses delivered to VAMCs in my state.

While it may make logistical sense to prioritize VA hospitals with high population density, we have the most vulnerable population in the country. Our more than 140,000 Veterans are older and have higher levels of pre-existing conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and lung disease that make them especially susceptible to developing a severe illness if they become infected with the virus. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, West Virginia has the most at-risk population in the United States, with 49% of all adults over the age 18 at-risk of serious illness if infected.¹ Additionally, West Virginia has one of the oldest Veteran populations in the country with 60% of our Veterans older than the age of 60. Only 15% of West Virginia Veterans have served post- 9/11, the rest have served in WWII, Korea, Vietnam, and Gulf War eras.

¹ <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/adults-at-higher-risk-of-serious-illness-if-infected-with-coronavirus/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>

I understand that cold temperature storage for the vaccines are a key issue and contribute to your logistics challenges. For example, the Pfizer vaccine must be stored at -94 °F and the Moderna vaccine at -4 °F. How will VA secure the refrigeration and transport equipment needed to safely ship and stock potential COVID-19 vaccine doses at rural locations? West Virginia Veterans should not be placed lower on the priority list simply because the VA has not yet invested in cold storage units in rural areas.

West Virginia is one of the most patriotic states in the country with a long history of answering the call to defend our nation. That unique service, however, also makes West Virginia Veterans especially vulnerable to the global pandemic we are now battling. The safety and well-being of every West Virginian must remain our top priority. Veterans across West Virginia have raised their hand to defend and protect our nation again and again and are no strangers to thriving during difficult times. However, the fact is that West Virginia Veterans' age and the physical nature of military service make them uniquely vulnerable to this threat. We must do everything we can to vaccinate and protect these Veterans, who have already given so much.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Joe Manchin III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

U.S. Senator Joe Manchin III