



Texas Organization of Rural & Community Hospitals

December 5, 2020

John Hellerstedt, MD
Commissioner
Texas Department of State Health Services
PO Box 149347
Austin, Texas 78714-9347

Sent via U.S. mail and email to Ricky Garcia

Re. Vaccine distribution to hospitals

Dear Dr. Hellerstedt:

I am writing you on behalf of the 157 rural hospitals across Texas to convey our disappointment and frustration in being excluded from the first round of COVID19 vaccine in Texas. The state's own distribution policy pledges "Geographic diversity through a balanced approach that considers access in urban and rural communities and in affected ZIP codes." Rural represents 15% of the states' population and many rural counties are enduring higher proportional surges than their urban neighbors, so small communities and providers should have been included.

We understand the Department of State Health Services (DSHS) faces logistical challenges with the Pfizer vaccine, given the ultra-cold storage and packaging requirements (975 doses per box). Several rural hospitals bought freezers, others were encouraged by the CDC recommendation based on manufacturer guidance that the vaccines could be stored in shipper for 15 days plus 5 in freezer, many others are working regionally to pool groups of 975. Rural hospitals are happy to share boxes and take responsibility for distribution, but they were left on the sideline. These hospitals could have made this work!

We recognize and are sensitive to the tough decisions DSHS must make, the speed at which they must be made, and the no win nature of resulting lists. And we know it is done. No doubt you are getting feedback, but we draw a distinction between the large hospitals wanting more and the rural hospitals who got none. And we believe a geographic balance principle was missed in the initial distribution.

Consequently, we would request a vaccine distribution rebalance across the state in the next round to resolve through prioritizing rural hospitals because rural doctors and nurses have been fighting the virus just as hard for just as long as our friends in the cities. We are encouraged by simpler logistics from the Moderna vaccine, but stand ready to assist should the next round be the Pfizer product.

Sincerely,

John Henderson
President/CEO