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Denver continues push to accelerate vaccines for people experiencing homelessness

DENVER – As more and more Denver residents become vaccinated against COVID-19, Mayor Michael B. Hancock and Denver officials continue to advocate for accelerating vaccine availability for people experiencing homelessness.

In a memo sent to State officials last week, the Denver Joint Task Force is urging the adoption of a location-based prioritization strategy to vaccinate homeless residents, rather than adhering to the State’s existing age-based approach.

“Our unhoused neighbors have been among our most vulnerable residents throughout the pandemic,” Mayor Hancock said. “It is critical that we accelerate immunizations not just for people experiencing homelessness, but also for the service providers, case managers and others who work closest with them, which will support the health of the general public as well.”

This location-based prioritization strategy would allow all people at a shelter, motel, managed campsite or unsanctioned encampment to receive the vaccine at the same time, regardless of age. The Task Force believes this would be a much more effective and efficient way to vaccinate an estimated 6,151 guests and staff of shelters, unsheltered people living in encampments, and service providers across Denver.

With the hospitalization rate for people experiencing homelessness three times that of the general population, “there is an urgent need to vaccinate people experiencing homelessness and service provider staff to induce herd immunity to protect people at risk and prevent large outbreaks in congregate settings,” the memo states. “Prioritization of people experiencing homelessness will also benefit our Denver metro region population by decreasing the rate of community transmission.”

The Task Force memo follows a Jan. 7 letter from Mayor Hancock to Gov. Polis proposing adjustments to the State’s vaccine distribution plan that included giving higher priority to people living in congregate settings such as homeless shelters.

The Task Force includes representatives from the Denver Department of Public Health and Environment, the Denver Department of Housing Stability, Denver Public Health at Denver Health and Hospital Authority, Colorado Coalition for the Homeless and other Homeless Leadership Council providers.

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