



Submitted via email to DHSSDMAC@dhs.wisconsin.gov.

Re: Vaccine Distribution Subcommittee Recommendations for the Wisconsin Department of Health Services for COVID-19 Vaccine Priority Group 1b

January 18, 2021

Dear Vaccine Distribution Subcommittee Members,

You have been charged by the State of Wisconsin with the difficult, but vital task of determining how best to distribute limited resources in a time of great need. We appreciate your work and analysis on behalf of the people of Wisconsin.

The Vaccine Distribution Subcommittee for the Wisconsin State Disaster Medical Advisory Committee (SDMAC) recently released “Recommendations for the Wisconsin Department of Health Services for COVID-19 Vaccine Priority Group 1b.” We write to urge you to reconsider the Subcommittee’s recommendations for public-facing essential workers and include spiritual care leaders as recommended vaccine recipients, with a particular focus on those who engage in the provision of funeral services and other essential duties.

In serving numerous faith traditions around the state, we represent millions of Wisconsin residents, including those called to be spiritual leaders and minister to the needs of the faithful. Beyond providing spiritual direction and care through religious rites and worship, we counsel and care for those with chronic conditions, the sick, the isolated, and the dying, both inside and outside of traditional health care settings. Ministers also provide aid and comfort to the vulnerable and those most in need by sponsoring programs that supply basic necessities, such as child care, education, nutrition, and shelter. Spiritual leaders preside over rituals for those who have newly-entered this world, who wish to join together in marriage, or who have died. They are called upon at all hours to aid families in crisis, minister to military and first responders, and serve at airports and mass transit chapels, in correctional and health care facilities, and numerous other places.

Faith leaders have continued to provide this public and necessary ministry throughout the pandemic, all while making necessary and sometimes complex modifications to ensure public health and safety. However, as with any essential duty, there is always a risk. This is especially true for members of our clergy serving other essential providers, such as health care workers, fire, police, and military, and ministering to those in congregate settings, such as nursing homes and correctional facilities. In offering funeral services for those who have succumbed to COVID-19 and their families, a spiritual leader risks exposure to those who may be infected. These risks are compounded when ministers must travel to provide services, which is necessary when people of a certain faith are spread out geographically.

We appreciate the Subcommittee's recognition of the unique and necessary role of spiritual care providers under the Phase 1A vaccine distribution recommendations. However, whether in a hospital, at a home, or in a place of worship, clergy and other spiritual leaders risk their own lives to help any human being at any time of life and death. There is no one else who can replace a spiritual minister, especially at life's end.

When identifying critical infrastructure workers, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) utilized the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security [list](#) of critical workers, which includes "[c]lergy and other essential support for houses of worship."¹ We ask that you follow this recommendation, as other states across the country have done, and include faith leaders as public-facing essential workers in need of vaccination under Phase 1B in Wisconsin.

As faith leaders, we remain committed to serving our communities and working with other community leaders to limit the spread of infection and protect lives. Please allow us to safely advance the common good throughout Wisconsin by allowing us to receive vaccination so that we can focus on continuing our vital ministries.

We continue to keep you and all who are working diligently to end the pandemic in our prayers and are constantly grateful for your service to our state.

In prayer and hope,

Kim Vercauteren
Executive Director
Wisconsin Catholic Conference

Reverend Cindy Crane
Director
Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin

Reverend Kerri Parker
Executive Director
Wisconsin Council of Churches

¹ [Advisory Memorandum on Ensuring Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers' Ability to Work During the Covid-19 Response](#) (Version 4.0), Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), U.S. Department of Homeland Security, updated Dec. 16, 2020.