



September 1, 2021

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
202 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

The Honorable Chiquita Brooks-LaSure
Administrator
Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services
7500 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21244

RE: Skilled Nursing Facility Staff Vaccination Mandate

Dear Secretary Becerra and Administrator Brooks-LaSure:

On behalf of the Iowa Health Care Association (IHCA) and its 352 skilled nursing facility members, 260 assisted living members and 110 home health agency members, I am writing you today about our shared goal of increasing staff vaccination rates in long-term care, and to share ideas about how we can work together toward that goal.

I feel compelled to write you because I have never been more concerned about our state and country's ability to care for those in skilled nursing care than I am today. Catastrophic workforce shortages have pushed the sector to the brink here and across the country, and I am fearful it is about to get much worse.

We appreciate the intent of the Administration's proposed COVID-19 vaccination mandate for skilled nursing facilities. It is critically important to consider how it is implemented to ensure success. The primary concern our members have shared with me is the impact a national mandate would have on our ability to retain much of our long-term care workforce.

We continue to face sustained and genuine vaccine hesitancy in one in four members of our long-term care staff in Iowa. There are over 58,000 Iowans providing long-term care to over 43,000 Iowans, including those who work in nursing homes, assisted living facilities and at home health agencies. Of those, an estimated 21,834 (38%) are not yet vaccinated, and we believe that many of them are at substantial risk to leave the long-term care profession without additional solutions to address their vaccine hesitancy. Given existing crisis-level workforce shortages, considering the loss of just a single staff member puts dozens- perhaps hundreds- of rural Iowa nursing homes at risk of closure. It truly is that dire.

Those who have been the most hesitant about the vaccine among our workforce are young women of child-bearing age who continue to have concerns about long-term safety and fertility implications. Adding to their angst is the amount of misinformation on social media and through word of mouth about the vaccine's safety and effectiveness. **A mandate without reasonable flexibility will drive these women out of our workforce, closing nursing homes and putting the lives of our most vulnerable fellow citizens at risk.**

Based on feedback from our members, we believe the following solutions could help ensure we together achieve success in increasing staff vaccination rates, while also retaining our critical workforce.

- **Include all health care workers in all Medicare and Medicaid certified settings in any vaccine mandate.** Singling out nursing facilities only will create a mass exodus of workers from long-term care to other health care settings, where such a mandate does not exist. It will be imperative with any mandate to include all health care sectors, to ensure continued access to long-term care services.
- **Invest in more education to address staff hesitancy.** We know education works. The more staff learn about the vaccine, the more uptake we are seeing in vaccine adoption. Since the vaccination roll-out to long-term care staff in the first quarter of 2021, we have provided our members and their employees with a variety of informational resources to dispel rumors, answer questions and provide facts about the vaccine to help increase vaccination rates. Over that time, we have seen staff vaccination rates increase steadily. We know we have more education to do, especially as new information becomes available regarding FDA approvals and other studies that prove the vaccine's safety and effectiveness. That is why we suggest the Administration dedicate \$25 million to expand vaccine education for long-term employees.
- **Provide additional funding for increased staffing costs.** With any mandate, care providers will face a significant increase in staffing costs, including use of agency staff, recruitment and retention programs, to maintain adequate staffing levels and to ensure consistent, quality care. We ask the Biden Administration to set aside \$3 billion from the Provider Relief Fund for these purposes. We also urge the Health Resources & Services Administration to open the portal for additional Provider Relief Funds, both in the general fund and rural fund, to cover crucial staffing costs needs.
- **Modify CMS visitation guidance to ask visitors about their vaccination and test results.** Vaccinating staff alone will not keep our nursing home residents safe. They remain exposed to risk of contracting COVID from visitors as well. We encourage the modification of CMS visitation guidance to allow skilled nursing facilities to ask visitors about their vaccination and test results. In addition, this policy should also apply to federal and state survey inspectors and ombudsman.
- **Offer test out provisions.** Lastly, and most importantly, long-term care services will not remain viable without a test-out provision. We ask the there be a federally funded daily testing alternative for staff who are unable or unwilling to take the vaccine. This will allow much-needed time for education efforts to work, and to prevent a sudden departure of staff.

This is a complicated problem that requires a comprehensive solution. Iowa will see of an exodus of staff who choose to leave the profession, rather than get the vaccine, without impactful solutions like these to drive adoption of the vaccine. We welcome the opportunity to work with you on solutions that can make a meaningful impact on preserving access to long-term care services and increasing staff vaccination rates to further enhance the quality of care provided.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,



Brent Willett
President & CEO