

COVID Booster Shots to Start in September

By Katie Lannan

State House News Service

The federal government plans to begin making COVID-19 booster shots available next month to adults who have already received both doses of a Moderna or Pfizer vaccine, an announcement Gov. Charlie Baker indicated came without advance guidance for states.

Baker said plans for a booster program did not come up in a regular Tuesday call between governors and Biden administration officials “on all things vaccines and all things COVID.”

“First time I heard about it was when I got home last night and saw the news,” he said during a GBH Radio interview. “So, I have no guidance, alright, even though we spent an hour on the phone yesterday with all of the people who probably knew something about what this is all about, which really bums me out.”

Baker described himself as an “enthusiastic supporter of a booster program” and said that once Massachusetts has more information about timing and other details, the state will “move very aggressively to make sure that those who are eligible to get boosters get them.”

“I think it’s really important that we do it, especially based on some of the studies that have come out of other countries that are farther ahead of us with respect to vaccines,” he said.

During a White House COVID-19 Response Team briefing Wednesday, top health officials said that while the three

vaccines used in the United States are highly effective at reducing risks of severe disease, hospitalization and death from the coronavirus, data show that levels of protection against infection decrease over time. Booster shots, they said, extend the protection.

The Biden administration's plan calls for the booster program to begin the week of Sept. 20, pending an independent evaluation by the Food and Drug Administration and dose recommendations from a Centers for Disease Control advisory panel.

Fully vaccinated adults age 18 and up would become eligible eight months after receiving their second doses of a Pfizer or Moderna vaccine.

"The plan ensures that people who were fully vaccinated earliest in the vaccination rollout will be eligible for a booster first," Surgeon General Vivek Murthy said. "This includes our most vulnerable populations, like our health care providers, nursing home residents and other seniors."

The first COVID-19 vaccines in Massachusetts were administered last December. With the vaccine supply constrained at the time, the first waves concentrated on health care workers at the front lines of the pandemic, then the residents and workers of long-term care facilities, first responders and other populations deemed at higher risk of contracting the virus.

More than 4.4 million people in Massachusetts are now fully vaccinated, according to the latest Department of Public Health figures. That includes 4,131,001 who got the Pfizer and Moderna shots, and another 296,222 who received the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccines.

Murthy said recipients of the J&J vaccines, which were not administered in the U.S. until March 2021, will likely need boosters as well. He said to expect more data on those shots

in coming weeks, and that officials will keep the public informed of J&J booster plans.

Jeff Zients, the White House coronavirus response coordinator, said the federal government will work “very closely” with governors and states to make sure there are enough vaccination sites, and that the Federal Emergency Management Agency “stands ready to help in any way.”

“Thanks to the aggressive actions we have taken to establish our vaccination program, it will be just as easy and convenient to get a booster shot as it is to get a first shot today,” he said. “We have enough vaccine supply for every American, and you’ll be able to get a booster at roughly 80,000 places across the country, including over 40,000 local pharmacies.”

Like the initial vaccines, the boosters will be free regardless of immigration or health insurance status, Zients said.

Sen. Ed Markey applauded the Biden administration for its booster decision, calling vaccines “our best tool for combating COVID-19.”

“As we continue to combat COVID-19 here at home, we cannot forget that no one is safe until everyone is safe from COVID-19. The risk of mutating variants will continue to serve as a threat to all of humanity if we do not mobilize a swift and robust response that extinguishes this virus from all corners of our globe,” Markey said in a statement. “That means working with our international partners on efforts to increase global production of COVID-19 vaccines, share pandemic resources, construct minimum infrastructure required to deliver vaccines globally, and coordinate inoculation campaigns aimed at those most vulnerable. We have no time to spare.”