

# Massachusetts Teachers Now Eligible For Vaccines on March 11

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State House News Service

Starting March 11, teachers, early educators and school staff members will be able to try to sign up for COVID-19 vaccine appointments through any of the state's 170 vaccination sites and mass vaccination sites plan to block off certain days to vaccinate educators, Gov. Charlie Baker said Wednesday morning.

The governor's announcement from the West Parish Elementary School in Gloucester comes as Baker and Education Commissioner Jeff Riley push for full-time, in-person education at all Massachusetts elementary schools by next month and after teachers unions ramped up a campaign backed by legislative leaders to get more of their members vaccinated sooner. One union official said teachers around the state were euphoric about the governor's announcement Wednesday.

It also followed President Joe Biden's decision Tuesday to prioritize the vaccination of pre-K-12 teachers and staff and child care workers through the federal pharmacy program and his direction to the roughly 20 states that had not already made teachers eligible to do so.

"My challenge to all states, territories, and the District of Columbia is this: We want every educator, school staff member, childcare worker to receive at least one shot by the end of the month of March," Biden said on Tuesday afternoon, adding that not every teacher would be able to secure an appointment in the first week.

By Wednesday morning, before Baker's announcement, CVS had added K-12 teachers to the list of populations eligible to receive a COVID-19 vaccine at its clinics, including those in Massachusetts.

Baker pointed out on a few occasions Wednesday that teachers were "next on the list" to become eligible under his administration's plan and defended his approach that has focused on vaccinating people whose age or medical conditions "put them in significant risk of hospitalization and death associated with COVID." But he said he would make educators and staffers eligible next week so there is no confusion "between federal eligibility guidelines and state eligibility guidelines and to coordinate with the feds."

"I don't want people to get confused about where they can go and where they can't go if the federal rules associated with some of this are different. So we're gonna move up the educator community, give them the ability to start booking appointments starting next week," he said.

As soon as Baker made his announcement, Gloucester Mayor Sefatia Romeo Theken let out a loud exclamation, "Yes!"

Massachusetts Teachers Association President Merrie Najimy said Wednesday that the governor's decision represented "a huge victory for our students, for our school employees and the entire school community."

"As an educator of 30 years, I can tell you with confidence that educators across the state are joyful," she said outside Watertown High School, though WCVB reported that she would not say whether she expects teachers will be back in classrooms five days a week by the early April deadline Riley has targeted.

On Friday afternoon, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education will meet to hear a presentation and vote on the emergency adoption of regulatory amendments that would

prioritize in-person instruction by giving Riley the authority to decide when hybrid and remote learning models will no longer count towards the state's requirements for student learning hours.

The governor said there are about 400,000 teachers, early educators and school staff members who will become newly eligible for the vaccine next week. They will join everyone 65 years old or older and people with two or more certain health conditions in the competition for a limited supply of doses and appointments.

"The 65-plus group and the two health conditions group between them represent about a million residents. So far, we've received enough vaccine to vaccinate, so far, about one-third of the folks in that category," Baker said. "The math on this is pretty straightforward: If we add 400,000 people on March 11 to the eligible pool, that'll mean we'll be back to having about a million people who are eligible to receive a vaccine. And as I said, we currently get about 150,000 first doses per week from the federal government."

The governor said his team's estimates are that first dose appointments should "start to cover pretty much everybody in that group about a month after they're eligible."

The demand for vaccine shots has vastly outpaced the supply, causing frustration and chaos as the hundreds of thousands of eligible people compete for the tens of thousands of available appointments each week.

Both Pfizer and Moderna are expected to increase their production in March and the single-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine approved last week is making its way to clinics in Massachusetts and around the country, offering hope of an accelerating vaccination effort.

But Baker said Wednesday that the White House told states not to expect any substantial increase in supply until the end of

March and that the state would get less of the new Johnson & Johnson vaccine than it was expecting.

"Massachusetts has been notified by the feds that we're only scheduled to get one shipment, which we got this week, of 58,000 doses for the month of March and that has been distributed primarily to hospitals, health systems, some community health centers," Baker said, adding that the news was "a big surprise to everybody."

Baker said Johnson & Johnson is now expected to deliver "way less than half of than what was originally presumed to be coming in the month of March" and said he's hoping the timeline can be accelerated. If it is and the number of doses delivered to Massachusetts increases substantially, the governor said the state will be ready to put them into people's arms.

"I can promise you this, we have plenty of capacity to put every dose we get to work," he said.

It's been a little more than two weeks since people 65 and older became eligible for the vaccine, and teachers were slated to be a part of the next group, which also includes other "essential workers."

Already, other groups that were slated to become eligible for a vaccine on the basis of their occupations at roughly the same time as teachers are making their cases to be similarly moved up in the line.

MBTA workers represented by Carmen's Local 589 said Wednesday morning that Baker "is jeopardizing their lives and public health by letting red tape and a lack of planning delay the administration of coronavirus vaccines to local bus and train operators."

The union said the MBTA has a vaccination site established in Quincy and that workers who were given a tour of the site

“hoped” that transit workers could be moved up in the state’s prioritization since the MBTA was setting up the infrastructure to vaccinate its workforce.

“We walked through the Quincy site and got the tour, and we were promised they’d have a coordinated rollout and plan where frontline transit personnel would be vaccinated in an orderly, coordinated fashion that helps ensure scheduling continuity and safety for the benefit of the riders,” union president Jim Evers said. “We are praising MBTA management for having the infrastructure in place, but it seems the Governor just isn’t paying attention so now we’re among the last frontline workers to get vaccinated. It’s a dangerous oversight by Baker, especially as schools reopen.”