

# Massachusetts vaccine call center goes live for 75 and older

By Chris Lisinski

State House News Service

More than a week after Gov. Charlie Baker first directed adults 75 and older to start booking COVID-19 vaccine appointments through an online-only platform, a state-run call center aimed at helping seniors who struggle to access or navigate the website is now live.

Massachusetts residents in the 75-and-older group can call 211 to get live, phone-based assistance securing slots for the vaccine. The call center will be open from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. only on weekdays, staffed with more than 500 representatives including those who speak Spanish and translators for more than 100 other languages.

Baker, who also debuted a new public awareness campaign about the vaccination effort Friday, stressed that those who use the call center may “have to wait a bit in the line” for help, particularly in its first days online.

“We believe this resource will be a huge help to individuals over 75 who may not have access to the internet or may have trouble using the website,” he said. “However, we still recommend using the website if it’s possible to do so, because you may experience, especially as this thing gets going, significant wait times using the call center.”

For now, the phone line is intended only for adults 75 and older who experience difficulty with the site. Baker said it will open up to those 65 and above once they gain eligibility later in the vaccine rollout, though he indicated it may not

stay running “all the way through the campaign.”

Dozens of legislators have cosponsored a bill (SD 300) that would require the administration to offer a multi-lingual hotline open 24/7, which contrasts from the new call center that will only be open during business hours Mondays through Fridays.

Baker said that the administration opted not to run its call center on the weekends “to make sure that it’s staffed appropriately and has the number of people we need to have on it to answer calls as they come in.”

“Most folks are making calls for this type of thing during the day, and I think our view is it’s better to have a ton of people on during the day, when the vast majority of people are reaching out, than to spread that community into the evening, when call volume would be significantly less,” he said.

The call center’s launch comes after sustained criticism from lawmakers, health experts and residents that the Baker administration’s vaccine rollout left appointments out of reach of many who now qualify.

Baker started directing older adults to book appointments for vaccines when they became available on Wednesday, Jan. 27, prompting widespread reports of many who could not navigate the website and others who simply did not have the internet access required.

In the face of frustration, Baker said last week that his administration has been standing up call centers since COVID-19 hit and is “pretty good at it.”

Asked Friday why it took until this point to launch the phone option, Baker replied that the administration needed to find individuals to staff the call center.

“You need people who have a particular set of skills and

capabilities to be able to serve and support people on this, and secondly, you need to train them and make sure that they're going to be able to do what you need to do, not just in English, but in multiple languages as well," Baker said, adding, "It took a week."

Sen. Eric Lesser, a Longmeadow Democrat who was one of the lead sponsors on the legislation requiring a 24/7 phone hotline, said the administration's call center is a step in the right direction, but flagged several remaining concerns.

"While I am encouraged to see the Governor taking some limited steps to achieve the goals outlined in our legislation, the state's online scheduling system remains far too complex, and the jury is still out on the quality and accessibility of the phone system announced today," Lesser said in a statement. "The Governor has his work cut out for him, Massachusetts vaccination rates remain far below our neighboring states, so there is much more work to do, especially regarding racial and geographic disparities in vaccine access."

The Baker administration also launched a new \$2.5 million campaign Friday, titled "Trust the Facts. Get the Vax." The effort is aimed at reassuring the public that COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective, focusing in particular on building trust with communities of color.

The state will run a televised advertisement on Sunday ahead of the Super Bowl, then extend the campaign to other platforms in 10 different languages.

Baker said the campaign was developed in part from a survey of more than 1,000 Massachusetts residents – which "oversampled" people of color and communities hardest hit by the virus – to determine what kind of messaging would be most effective.

"We recognize that ensuring access isn't enough," Baker said. "We need to reach out to people in these communities who may be hesitant about the vaccination, and we understand that some

may be distrustful of the medical system or have questions and concerns about the vaccine. This campaign aims to reach people where they are and leverage trusted voices to help explain why the vaccine is safe and effective.”

While Baker has acknowledged and shared some frustrations about the vaccine rollout, he has often defended his administration’s approach and pointed to limited vaccine distribution and narrow forecasts about supply from the federal government as constraining factors.

Before COVID-19 vaccines became available, Baker on several occasions noted that Massachusetts already distributes hundreds of thousands of flu vaccines every year.

“It is my assumption that whatever were to happen with a COVID vaccine would probably run through a fairly traditional distribution model because it’s already there,” he said on Sept. 17.

Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders told reporters that, through Thursday, the state received 1.2 million vaccine doses and had administered about 713,000.

Data published by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention may show a lower rate of vaccine administration in Massachusetts, she said, describing that information as “not yet all aggregated” and missing updates from some sites.

The potential addition of a third vaccine option could make a notable difference if Johnson & Johnson receives emergency use authorization for its vaccine candidate, which the company requested on Thursday.

The Johnson & Johnson option uses a single dose, rather than the two doses required with both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, and does not need as substantial refrigeration infrastructure as the other two. Those factors, he said, could make it far easier to distribute.

“If the J&J vaccine gets approved, it changes a lot of things about how fast people can get vaccinated,” Baker said.