

Sheriff's survey shows inmates apprehensive about coronavirus vaccine

By Colin A. Young

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People incarcerated in state prisons or county houses of correction will be eligible to get the COVID-19 vaccine starting Monday, but Gov. Charlie Baker said Wednesday his administration does not know how many will actually accept it.

Middlesex County Sheriff Peter Koutoujian had been wondering the same thing as he prepared to implement a vaccination plan, so his office asked the people incarcerated in Billerica whether they would like to get the vaccine and, if not, what their concerns about it are.

Of the 406 incarcerated people who responded to the sheriff's survey, 40 percent said they would take an approved COVID-19 vaccine right now if it were offered to them free of charge and 60 percent said they would refuse the vaccination, according to survey results that Koutoujian's office shared with the News Service.

But of those who said they would refuse a COVID-19, about 34 percent said they were not firmly opposed and would be willing to change their mind about getting vaccinated. In total, 60 percent of those who said they would decline a vaccine were open to at least learning more about it.

"With these baseline surveys, we can not only understand how many people are initially interested in receiving vaccinations, but how we can encourage more people to receive them through educational and informational efforts," Koutoujian said.

The survey asked incarcerated people who are hesitant about getting the vaccine what is driving that reluctance. The number one concern was around safety and effectiveness (just more than 30 percent of those who said they would decline a vaccine), followed closely by a general distrust of vaccines (just less than 30 percent). Almost 16 percent of those who were reluctant to get vaccinated said they needed more information, 7.5 percent cited concerns about the rushed vaccine timeline, and about 15 percent cited some other reason.

The survey results will be used to craft vaccine information and education campaigns, including video messages and sessions with outside medical experts. After those sessions, Koutoujian's office plans a second survey to assess whether and how attitudes towards vaccination change among those incarcerated.

Dr. Alysse Wurcel, an infectious diseases specialist at Tufts Medical Center who has been advising Koutoujian's office on coronavirus matters since late February, said she interprets the survey results as "very promising" and said the baseline data will help tailor vaccine education programs in Middlesex County and around the country.

"Understanding vaccine willingness and hesitancy in both employees and incarcerated individuals is the first crucial step in successfully operationalizing COVID-19 vaccination in the jails. The data collected by Sheriff Koutoujian is the first I am seeing on COVID-19 vaccination interest amongst people in jail in the nation, and it will help us develop better, smarter educational programs and policy," she said. "I hope to see this data shared and potentially published as we work towards protecting those in congregate care settings from COVID-19."

During a press conference Wednesday to detail how vaccination will work for congregate care and corrections facilities,

Baker fielded a question about why someone in prison or jail, perhaps with a serious criminal record, should come before others, like elderly people who live independently, in the state's vaccine distribution priority list.

"So we made the decision early on that we were going to focus on what we consider to be populations that were most at risk, and all the data and all the evidence makes pretty clear that congregate care settings are at-risk communities no matter how you define them," the governor said. "And I remind people that there are 4,500 public employees who work in the state's correctional system who are every bit as much at risk as the people who are inmates there. I think from our point of view, congregate facilities are congregate facilities."