Why a Man With AIDS Was Denied a COVID-19 Vaccine in Philadelphia

But people living with HIV/AIDS can get a COVID-19 vaccine in the rest of Pennsylvania.

February 24, 2021 By Trent Straube

UPDATE: On Tuesday, February 23, Philadelphia's health department updated its guidelines regarding who is eligible to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. People with HIV are now able to get the vaccine. For more details, see this article in Philadelphia Gay News.

Pennsylvania guidelines state that people living with HIV are currently eligible to receive vaccines for COVID-19. So why was a Philadelphia resident with an AIDS diagnosis denied a COVID-19 vaccine?

In short, the city's vaccine guidelines differ from those of the rest of the state, reports Philadelphia Gay News in a February 22 article. And according to the city's rules, people living with HIV are not approved to get the COVID-19 vaccines at this moment. People eligible in Philadelphia's current phase of vaccinations include those 75 years old or older, frontline essential workers and people who live in congregate settings, such as prisons and homeless shelters. Also approved are people with the following health conditions: cancer, chronic kidney disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, pregnancy, Down syndrome, heart conditions, severe obesity and sickle cell disease. People who smoke tobacco and people with compromised immune systems due to a solid organ transplant may also receive the vaccine.

At a press conference the previous week, the city's health commissioner, Thomas A. Farley, said people with AIDS were eligible for the COVID-19 vaccines because they meet the high-risk criteria established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). However, people living with HIV who are on treatment and haven't progressed to AIDS weren't eligible because their immune systems weren't as compromised.

Farley cautioned, though, that just because people are eligible doesn't mean they are guaranteed to get a vaccine, because the vaccines are in short supply. This might have been the case for the man with AIDS who was turned away from a Walgreens vaccine center.

Referred to as Richard Doe by Philadelphia Gay News to protect his privacy, he is 59. He told the newspaper he had made an appointment for a vaccine but then was informed that the city had

instructed Walgreens to vaccinate only people 75 and older.

“I’ve survived AIDS for 30 years, and I definitely don’t want to die now from COVID,” he told the paper. “I don’t understand why the city appears to be so resistant to doing the right thing.”

Local HIV experts said they hoped the city would reconsider its criteria and include those living with HIV (but not AIDS), especially now that a growing body of data suggest that people living with HIV might have a modestly higher risk for severe COVID-19 (experts note, however, that much remains to be learned). For more details on that, see “Concerns: COVID-19 and HIV.”

In related POZ news, see “The First COVID-19 Vaccine Is Here. Is It Safe for People With HIV?” and “How Does COVID-19 Affect People With HIV?” A collection of similar articles can be found by clicking #COVID-19 on POZ.com.

To learn more about the difference between HIV and AIDS, see this section of the HIV Basics on POZ.com.

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