

MAURA T. HEALEY
GOVERNOR

KIMBERLEY DRISCOLL
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR



KATHLEEN E. WALSH
SECRETARY

ROBERT GOLDSTEIN, MD, PhD
COMMISSIONER

COVID-19 Vaccine Equity Update to the Legislature March 22, 2024

STATUTORY REQUIREMENT
CHAPTER 22 OF THE ACTS OF 2022

[HTTPS://MALEGISLATURE.GOV/LAWS/SESSIONLAWS/ACTS/2022/CHAPTER22](https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2022/Chapter22)

SECTION 30. Notwithstanding any general or special law to the contrary, the secretary of health and human services shall prepare and implement a detailed comprehensive COVID-19 vaccination equity plan, including interim goals, benchmarks and timelines, to significantly increase the proportion of adults and children who are fully vaccinated for COVID-19, including booster vaccinations, among communities in the commonwealth that have disproportionately low vaccination rates, which may include, but shall not be limited to, minority, immigrant and low-income communities. The goal of the plan shall be to eliminate disparities in the rates of vaccination. The plan shall include: (i) mechanisms necessary to directly deliver medically and scientifically accurate, culturally competent and linguistically diverse information about the safety and efficacy of vaccination, including particularly the COVID-19 vaccine, and the pathways to receiving a COVID-19 vaccine; (ii) a complete list of existing or new community-based partnerships for implementation of the plan, including an explanation of the role of local public health departments or boards of health, community-rooted faith-based organizations and locally-based health care providers in implementing the plan; and (iii) a budget for implementation with funding sources identified. The secretary shall provide the plan in writing to the house and senate committees on ways and means, the joint committee on COVID-19 and emergency preparedness and management and the joint committee on public health and make the plan publicly available on the website of the department of public health not later than 30 days after the effective date of this section. The secretary shall report progress towards achieving the equity plan goals by region, by municipality and statewide not less than every 60 days following the completion of the plan.

COVID-19 VACCINE EQUITY 60-DAY UPDATE TO THE LEGISLATURE

OVERVIEW

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health submitted its original [Vaccine Equity Plan](#) to the Legislature on March 15, 2022. This report represents the latest update to that plan, highlighting continuing efforts to increase access to and uptake of the COVID-19 vaccine.

The [Vaccine Equity Initiative](#) (VEI) is a strategic component of the Vaccine Equity Plan. VEI was established in February 2021 to work with the populations and communities hardest hit by COVID-19 to increase awareness and acceptance of the vaccine, access to vaccination locations, and vaccine administration rates. This approach is driven by community needs and is centered on equity.

In September 2023, the FDA approved and CDC recommended the 2023-2024 seasonal Pfizer – BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines, followed by approval of a seasonal Novavax COVID-19 vaccine.

As of December 2, 2023, the Massachusetts statewide rate for vaccination with the updated COVID-19 vaccine was 16.2%, a rate DPH considers low and is working to increase. Despite this, it is used as a comparison in this report because it highlights the lag that often occurs in VEI priority communities when a new dose is authorized. Residents of VEI communities have a vaccination rate of 10.5%, compared to the statewide rate of 16.2%. The rural communities, which also have support from VEI, have a vaccination rate that approaches the statewide rate at 17.7%.

	Vaccination Percentage
VEI Communities	10.5%
Non-VEI Communities	18.8%
Rural Clusters	17.7%
MA Statewide	16.2%

With the launch of the updated COVID-19 vaccine, VEI has been working on closing the initial gap between the VEI communities and their non-VEI counterparts. By December 2, 2023:

- One VEI community, Framingham, exceeds the statewide rate of 16.2% with a rate of 18.7%, and 4 VEI communities are within 5 percentage points of the overall state rate (Boston, Malden, Leominster, and Holyoke).

- A majority of the residents who have received the vaccine in the VEI communities are 65 years old and older, a population at greater risk of serious illness from COVID-19.
- 9 rural clusters exceed the statewide rate, 3 of which are over 5 percentage points higher. The 4 other rural clusters are within 5 percentage points of the state.

VEI continues to build on the investments made and relationships created since it launched, aligning its programs with the reality of COVID-19's current phase. As it promotes and provides access to the updated vaccine dose made available in Fall 2023, VEI continues to identify and reduce barriers to, increase access to, and promote awareness regarding the effectiveness and safety of COVID-19 vaccines.

VACCINE ACCESS IN THE CURRENT PHASE

The privatization of the COVID-19 vaccine resulted in some initial delays in the availability of the vaccine in September and October 2023, as supply chains readjusted. VEI shared information with its communities about finding vaccine doses, and by November 2023, most pharmacies, doctors' offices, and other health care providers had vaccine doses available.

During Fall and early Winter 2023, VEI worked with community partners to build awareness of the importance of the updated vaccine and its availability in the community. VEI held a town hall meeting on COVID vaccinations in early December with community stakeholders, including Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs), Tribal and Indigenous Peoples Serving Organizations (TIPSOs), and local boards of health. The DPH website was updated with new promotional materials in 12 languages. In addition to providing training and materials to community partners, VEI mailed 250,000 oversized postcards to households in the 20 VEI communities and 13 rural clusters in several languages. The mailers point people to vaccination sites in their communities, including pharmacies and Community Health Centers.

DPH MOBILE CLINICS: INCREASING ACCESS

Despite the wider availability of vaccinations in many communities, barriers to vaccination still exist for many people living in communities and populations most impacted by COVID-19. These barriers can be based in culture, language, and practical considerations such as transportation. In these cases, VEI works with its local partners to encourage them to hold clinics with vaccinations provided by DPH's Mobile Vaccination Program. These clinics are small and tailored to specific communities or population groups who would otherwise lack access to vaccination.

From October 1, 2023 through December 11, 2023, DPH's Mobile Vaccination team collaborated with community partners to host 205 clinics, resulting in 6,912 doses provided to people in VEI communities.

Mobile vaccination clinics are prioritized for the populations most disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Clinics are deployed to meet the needs of prioritized populations across the Commonwealth, including rural areas, where transportation is a major barrier to access.

RESPONDING TO COMMUNITY NEED: VACCINE ACCESS IN EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE SHELTERS

In Fall and Winter 2023, the Office of Health Equity's Community Engagement Unit (CE Unit) responded to an emerging need for vaccinations for people in Emergency Assistance Shelters. Earlier in the year, they had heard from CBOs and FBOs who work with families in the shelters, who signaled the need for additional help. Because of the information communicated by community partners, the CE Unit had an understanding of the context of the situation that proved valuable in organizing the public health response.

CE Unit staff served as site coordinators in several shelters, managing the logistics of bringing vaccinators into the shelters, and coordinating with BIDLS, OPEM, and EHS Global Response. They ensured that CBOs and FBOs were able to work with families in the shelters to educate them about the vaccinations and help schedule their participation and prepare their paperwork. This increased the families' confidence in the vaccine and decreased their anxiety while streamlining the process for the vaccination team. While helping families with their vaccinations, CBOs and FBOs were also able to assess their other needs and provide connections and resources to help address them. The Rural Vaccine Program has also been working closely with the Community Engagement Unit to bring resources to unhoused families in rural parts of the state.

The experience in the EA Shelters proved invaluable when the Governor announced two week-long legal clinics where families from the shelters would have the opportunity for vaccination against COVID-19 and Flu. The CE Unit engaged CBOs and FBOs and ensured that they would have access to the clinics, which were held at a National Guard training center with high security. They collaborated with the VEI Communications team to ensure that information in the right languages was available for distribution at the site, and continued work with BIDLS, OPEM, and the Global Response Team to make sure that people at the legal clinics could access the vaccinations in a culturally appropriate way, with translators available. The vaccination effort at the clinics resulted in more than 950 adults and children receiving seasonal vaccinations, including people who otherwise would have faced significant barriers to access.

IMPACT OF THE VACCINE EQUITY INITIATIVE SINCE ITS LAUNCH

Since the COVID-19 Vaccine Equity Initiative launched in February 2021:

- Nearly 1.9 million residents in the VEI communities have been vaccinated with a first dose, closing a 6-percentage point gap in vaccination rates between the VEI and non-VEI communities in March of 2021 by half to a 3-percentage point gap in September 2023.

- Since vaccines became available to most age groups in May 2021, VEI communities have increased the number of their population with a complete primary series by 107%, outpacing non-VEI communities at 76%.
- The bivalent booster vaccines became available to most age groups in September 2022. VEI communities increased the number of their population with boosters after 9/1/2022 by 29%, while the non-VEI communities were at 39%.
- All 20 VEI communities made strides in primary series completion rates: the VEI municipalities vaccinated over 1.8 million residents with a primary series. The VEI communities have increased the primary series completion rates in their BIPOC communities by ~46 percentage points from September 2022 through August 2023, which was an 150% increase.
- All 20 VEI communities made strides in 2022 booster rates: the VEI municipalities vaccinated over 600,000 residents with boosters. The VEI communities increased the 2022 booster rates in their BIPOC communities by ~29 percentage points from September 2022 through August 2023.
- Through VEI, DPH awarded \$62.8M to 198 community organizations and over \$4.7M to prioritized municipalities and local boards of health for vaccine access, education, and outreach and to help build local health capacity.

VEI MUNICIPALITY VACCINATION DATA

The Vaccine Equity Initiative publishes the latest vaccination data weekly on an Immunization for Respiratory Illness dashboard, available at <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/immunizations-for-respiratory-diseases>. The data are publicly available and stratify vaccination rates across sex, age, and race/ethnicity for each of the 20 VEI communities, as well as statewide. Monthly highlights of VEI community efforts can be seen at <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-vaccine-equity-initiative-highlights>.

MOVING FORWARD

DPH is committed to ensuring that education and community-based clinics continue throughout the peak respiratory illness season, with plans to emphasize these efforts through February 2024. The clinics provided by DPH Mobile and the Vaccine Access and Administration in Community Settings programs in collaboration with community partners are ongoing, and DPH's in-home vaccination program continues to offer services. DPH is also educating providers, partners, and the public about the availability of the Federal Bridge Access Program, which provides vaccines to adults who are uninsured or underinsured. To bolster these efforts and to build community trust in vaccines, VEI continues to advise VEI programs and partners on communications efforts.

VEI continues to disseminate up to date information and guidelines about the vaccine to its communities, including the most recent guidance issued by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) around updated dosing and administration to community partners.

The Department is committed to continued public access to data for the [COVID-19 Vaccination Dashboard](#), making it easier for community members and decision-makers to visualize data and analyze trends on COVID-19 vaccination and uptake in VEI communities. With these data now publicly accessible online, and information about the Vaccine Equity Initiative regularly updated on the DPH [website](#) this will be the last 60-day report on the Vaccine Equity Plan.