

THE SENATE
STATE OF NEW YORK



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January 22, 2021

Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NYS Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Re: Vaccine Distribution

Dear Governor Cuomo:

Like most lawmakers, my office is being flooded with calls and emails from frustrated New Yorkers desperate to set up appointments to receive vaccines for COVID-19. Cases have been reported to me where individuals call the state vaccination hotline and are on the phone for hours, only for their call to be disconnected. We are also hearing from individuals who are spending hours on end scouring the website of multiple providers only to be met with broken links, dead ends and cancelled appointments. Scheduling a vaccine appointment is quickly turning into a full time job for unpaid family caregivers, and it is critical for the state to take immediate action to address this issue. While I understand that the fundamental challenge the state is facing is the overall lack of vaccine supply, there are steps that can be taken immediately to better streamline the distribution process and minimize the frustration New Yorkers across the state are experiencing. I urge you to consider taking these steps outlined below immediately to improve the process and reassure anxious New Yorkers.

First and foremost, the state must establish a centralized vaccination appointment system with the strength and capacity necessary to fully accommodate the high volume we know it would receive. This centralized system must accept appointments electronically and over the phone so that computer illiterate seniors are not left behind in the process. While I understand that the state's original vaccination website was meant to act as a 'one-stop-shop' to link residents with vaccine administrators, the site was woefully incapable of living up to that promise.

First, it did not have the strength to handle the flood of traffic we knew it would receive. Second, it required a massive amount of redirects that caused problems for both consumers and providers. The centralized system should be able to actually set appointments for residents at their nearest location, not simply redirect them to yet another website, which often results in a dead end. Here in New York, we are a world-class technological hub, and we must partner with providers with a proven track record of handling this type of traffic and scheduling system.

It is also critical that the state takes every step possible to ensure New Yorkers across every region have access to the vaccine, and as part of that effort, I respectfully request that you set up a state-operated

vaccination site in the Mid-Hudson Valley. Not only are many of my constituents having difficulty getting through online and over the phone to schedule an appointment—as is the case for most eligible New Yorkers—those living in the Mid-Hudson Valley face an additional challenge as the closest New York State-operated vaccination sites are currently located in Albany and Westchester counties. This would require many of my constituents to travel over 100 miles to receive a vaccine at any one of those sites. Although some of my constituents can and have made the trip, others, many seniors in particular, are unable to make that trip, especially in the winter months. We will not be able to vaccinate everyone who needs it unless we ensure we have convenient, easily accessible sites people know they can turn to.

Finally, I understand these are unprecedented times and we all knew there were going to be issues in the massive undertaking of getting vaccines to everyone who needs and wants them, however, there is no doubt that New York State is behind where it should be in the vaccine rollout. While some of the problems such as the vaccine supply are out of the state's control, other problems have resulted from issues within the state's control and could be addressed through improved communication. **For this reason, I respectfully request that a daily briefing specifically for lawmakers—as one done at the start of the pandemic—be resumed.**

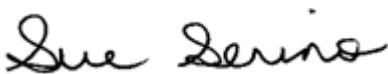
As you know, these briefings were more in-depth than what is being provided in the 'Control Rooms' and allowed us to better assist our constituents, as well as provide an opportunity for us to share their reported issues and concerns directly with your administration and the Department of Health in real time. Our ability to answer questions and address concerns directly will play a direct roll in reducing the volume of traffic to your office and state sites.

An example of why these briefings are so important has to do with the state's failed website. Many local and state officials were actively helping our constituents navigate the state vaccination website and telling residents to refer to it to find a vaccination distribution site near them. In less than 24 hours, the site was completely reconfigured and only state distribution sites began to be listed. That major change came with no warning and required us to spend an inordinate amount of time circling back with constituents—many of whom have trouble with computers as it is—to inform them of the change, which resulted in many of them losing the opportunity to access appointments when they finally went live on local pharmacy websites.

Right now, the state needs to be making every effort to ensure New Yorkers in every region have access to the vaccine, and that starts with ensuring they have the ability to actually set up an appointment and access to the information they need to get their questions answered during this massive undertaking. The critical steps outlined above are crucial for improving the state's distribution of the vaccine, and protecting the public health of all New Yorkers.

I appreciate your attention to this matter, and I look forward to working together to ensure that every New Yorker who wishes to receive the vaccine has the opportunity to access it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sue Serino".

Senator Sue Serino
41st District