



December 2, 2020

## The Coronavirus Vaccine and Black and Latinx People

According to CNN, vaccine advisers to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently voted 13-1 to recommend that in Phase 1a, both front line health care workers and residents of long-term care facilities be first in line for any coronavirus vaccines that get emergency authorization from the US Food and Drug Administration. Very frail people in long-term care facilities like nursing homes account for 40% of coronavirus deaths in the US and the committee members felt strongly they need to be protected. So far, 100,000 long term care facility residents have died from COVID-19.

I agree with the decision to prioritize front line health care workers, nursing home residents, and the workers that take care of nursing home residents, many of whom are Black and Latinx. But, I was glad to be part of a group of leaders over the weekend to urge members of Congress and Gov. J.B. Pritzker to also prioritize the distribution of coronavirus vaccine to Black and Latinx communities hit hard by the pandemic, as recently reported in the Chicago Sun-Times by reporter Tom Schuba.

Phases 1b and 1c of the vaccine roll out will likely include essential workers such as food production workers who are at high risk of infection, as well as emergency personnel and perhaps people at highest risk of coronavirus complications and death.

Black and Latinx people are among those at highest risk of death. Early in the pandemic in Chicago, 70% of the deaths from COVID-19 disease occurred in Blacks. According to the Chicago Department of Public Health COVID-19 Dashboard, from the start of the pandemic in March through November 30, more Blacks have died from COVID-19 disease than any other ethnic group. In this time period, 1411 Blacks have died, 1161 Latinx have died, and 723 Whites have died from COVID-19 disease in Chicago. Blacks account for more than twice the number of coronavirus deaths as Whites, and Latinx account for the highest number of cases, more than double that of Whites.

However, I know that many in the African American and Latinx communities remain wary of immunization and the medical establishment at large. Much of this mistrust can be traced back to the U.S. government's Tuskegee syphilis research, which withheld treatment of poor Black men over a 40-year period.

That history goes deep. And when you think about how the government has failed Black and Latinx communities again and again, that's the trust that Black and Latinx people struggle with.

It is also been reported that large academic hospitals in Chicago have had a tough time recruiting minority volunteers to test vaccines, namely members of the Black community. At a recent press conference, I was pressed on that troubling fact, but I pushed back and I asked whether any of the few dozen attendees were

asked to participate. Not a single hand shot up. This is another example of the system blaming Black people for not participating in something that was really never explained and that they were never really truly invited to. As Ibram X. Kendi states, people “have been led to believe there is something wrong with Black people, and not the policies that have enslaved, oppressed, and confined so many Black people.”

Nevertheless, at this time we have to build confidence in the vaccine and create an equitable distribution process. We could employ outreach workers tied to their communities to help convey the message that the vaccine is safe and to make sure people understand any side effects.

We have to make sure that people trust that the vaccine will work and we need to do everything that we can to bring an understanding to our community about how important it is to take the vaccine and to be able to trust it. Let’s make moves now to protect those who are most vulnerable, beginning with our Black and Latinx brothers and sisters.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'La Shawn K. Ford', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford  
State Representative-Eighth District