

February 03, 2021

Oregon State Legislature
House Subcommittee on COVID-19
900 Court St. NW
Salem Oregon 97301

RE: Oregon state correctional staff and adults in state custody; COVID-19 vaccinations

Dear Representatives Dexter, Hayden and committee members,

I am writing today in support of COVID-19 vaccination for Adults In Custody (AICs) and correctional facility staff.

I am a Board Certified Internal Medicine physician. I provide healthcare to patients in the hospital, primary care and virtual settings. I am involved in research for human rights and public health. I have assisted the COVID-19 Habeas Strike Force under the leadership of Tara Herivel, for about three months.

I have learned that significant barriers exist for AICs, and they are often unable to take appropriate COVID-19 safety measures. Every case I have assisted with details the impossibility of social distancing. I have been told that different units commingle during yard time and meals. After nearly a year of this pandemic it has been reported to me that the silverware and plates are still in "pot-luck" style, meaning inmates touch utensils and cups that they do not take for themselves. I was told that many AICs do not have the ability to wash their hands before or during meal times. Most inmates told me that they have no hand sanitizer in their units and often have a small supply of "community" rags that up to 100 people use in the bathroom. During our phone calls, the AICs only recently were given the supplies to clean the phone and immediate area between uses. Most inmates described no cleaning protocol of high touch areas. Every inmate described unmasked correctional officers. These conditions are dangerous for the spread of COVID-19 amongst AICs, correctional officers and their families, and the surrounding communities.

Health care in the correctional system should be available and provided at the same standard as health care in the general population. We know that people living in communal settings are at higher risk for spreading disease. Healthcare workers must treat patients and communities without bias. Vaccination of correctional officers and inmates will protect staff, AICs and communities. Choosing to not vaccinate AICs is akin to vaccination based on moral worthiness. We must vaccinate based on risk and harm level.

I urge you to support vaccination of AICs and correctional facility staff because prison health is public health.

Sincerely,



Brianna da Silva Bhatia, MD
House District 33, Portland, OR