

Feb. 21, 2021

*A Message from the COVID Safety Team*

Dear staff,

We are getting some questions about vaccine availability for staff, and we also want to clear up some misinformation.

- **Do we have staff who are vaccinated?** Yes, we are grateful that some staff members have received the COVID-19 vaccine. Vaccine status is protected health information, and we are not requiring staff to be vaccinated. We are not currently collecting information from staff about their vaccine status.
- **What is Bellingham Public Schools role in getting vaccines for staff?** We, as a school district, do **not** have control over the supply, distribution or timeline of the vaccine. We have been trying to connect vaccine-eligible staff members with vaccine distribution opportunities. Please keep in mind that someone's eligibility and/or vaccine status is protected personal information. Oftentimes people are vaccinated for reasons we may not know about and are not allowed to ask about.
- **Who is in charge of determining eligibility?** The [Washington State Department of Health](#) (DOH) determines vaccine eligibility.
  - We are currently in Phase 1B tier 1 of vaccine distribution. The vaccine is available to anyone 65 and older, and all people 50 and older who also live in a multigenerational household.
  - This is in addition to populations eligible during phase 1A including health care workers at high risk for COVID-19 infection, first responders, people who live or work in long-term care facilities, and all other workers in health settings who are at risk of COVID-19.
- **Do any phases call out teachers or school staff?** Phase 1A Tier 2 is included in who is eligible for vaccine and is relevant for schools. “Workers in health care settings” and a “community-based health care workforce” are eligible for vaccines. This includes school nurses, behavioral health providers, speech language pathologists, psychologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists and staff supporting the screening room.
- **I heard about a vaccine clinic for staff, but I did not receive any information about it from the district or my union. What's up?** Hoagland Pharmacy contacted our district and offered to host a vaccine clinic for eligible staff. They contacted other school districts in Whatcom County with the same offer, and districts scheduled their clinics. We held the clinic on Feb. 16. We were told there would be between 80-120 doses available.

- We worked with human resources to list all employees in reverse age order. We contacted all employees over 65 to see if they wanted to sign up to receive a vaccine on Feb. 16.
  - We emailed staff who are 50-64 years old in the district with a link to a Microsoft Form which asked them to self-identify as living in a multigenerational household, with the definition from the DOH included. Anyone who completed the form and met the criteria were offered an appointment for Feb. 16. **Note:** There were many people who did not open the email with the link to the form; there were others that opened and completed the form after we had filled all appointments. Additionally, on the night of the clinic, both district employees and the pharmacy staff screened individuals further to assess for eligibility.
  - We worked with human resources to identify staff who are behavioral health providers with licensure and then contacted that group to see if they wanted to receive a vaccine on Feb. 16.
- **Why can't BPS just advocate that all staff who work with students get the vaccine ASAP?** We have been working hard to advocate. Challenges include the definitions of eligibility and the supply of vaccine. Providers shift their eligibility requirements depending on the amount of vaccine they receive. Providers are having to collapse their own eligibility requirements because they are receiving so little vaccine.

There have been instances of vaccine providers informing staff members directly that they have additional doses at the end of a clinic shift. In other cases, vaccine providers have reached out to the school district urgently if they have doses left in a vaccine vial after all appointments have been met, and the doses will be wasted if not given within a very short time frame. In our district, when we are informed that there are these emergent-use doses available, we work from a list of in-person employees, sorted from oldest to youngest. We make phone calls from the list to see 1) if the individual wants to receive vaccine and 2) is able to get to the clinic in the time frame. Many times people don't answer the phone and/or aren't available to receive the vaccine, in which case we move down the list to the next individual.

Big picture, we have been working with the Whatcom County Health Department and vaccine providers like PeaceHealth and Hoagland's to understand who all in a school system can be considered eligible under the DOH definition. In our schools, we have "screening rooms" which are the COVID-19 specific health rooms required by [OSPI](#) for all schools. The guidance says that "every school should have an identified space for isolating ill persons until they can be sent home." People working in the screening rooms have been identified and trained by school nurses to work in the screening rooms. We have been guided by the Whatcom County Health Department that staff members who work in our screening rooms—including the custodians who clean the screening rooms—are eligible for vaccine, as well as employees providing health services support outside of

screening rooms (for example, some staff members to whom our school nurses delegate the responsibility of providing medical care for high-risk students).

Because the DOH definitions are not a good fit for a school setting, and because the vaccine distribution system across the country is so diffuse, our district is working hard to apply a broad umbrella definition of health services support. For example, we have teachers taking the temperatures of children daily, performing screening (“all screening all the time”), and working with students *before* they get sent to the screening room. We think there is a *very* strong case that these staff members are eligible for vaccine under Phase 1A Tier 2. So far, however, health authorities have not opened vaccine eligibility to these groups.

We recognize that vaccine access is difficult. Please remember that there is a community benefit to increasing access to individuals. In our district we remain committed to connecting eligible individuals to vaccine opportunities.

If you have a question about vaccines or any other COVID-related topic, [please email our BPS COVID safety team](#).