

Homeless COVID-19 vaccination effort to start soon

Pine Street Inn slated to get 100 initial doses



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MASSACHUSETTS IS PREPARING to move ahead with its plan to start administering COVID-19 vaccines to homeless people, with the Pine Street Inn in Boston expected to receive 100 doses sometime in the next two weeks.

Dr. Jim O'Connell, president of the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program, said the Pine Street Inn has about 400 people staying at its shelter, and those most at risk will be prioritized. O'Connell is waiting on Johns Hopkins University to provide more insight on how a triage tool developed to determine who's most at risk will be administered.

"Our goal in this is to look at it through an equity lens, to make sure we're not biasing the shot toward people that are easier to get to or something like that," O'Connell said.

Administering the second shot of a two-dose vaccine could be challenging since most homeless people don't have phones. But O'Connell thinks the challenge isn't insurmountable.

"Most people like the shelter they're staying in and intend to stay there, so we'll vaccinate everybody [in shelters] and I'm going to guess a fair percentage of them will still be there in a month and we'll be able to vaccinate them [again]," O'Connell said.

O'Connell's program has the benefit of knowing most of those who are homeless. He thinks the program's reputation will get people to trust the vaccine. He credits strong partnerships with state and local departments of public health and shelters for their planning around the vaccine rollout.

"Because of [our city-wide] network, if people get housed during that time we'll know where they are. This is the benefit of having mayors over these last several years who have been pretty dedicated to homeless people," O'Connell said.

In Boston alone there are several shelters people are staying in, including a men's shelter, a women's shelter and three hotels that have been designated as shelters because of the pandemic.

O'Connell said his staff will work the streets to inoculate people who refuse to stay in shelters.

Kelly Turley, associate director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, said it is likely that people experiencing homelessness will be missed in the process since access to shelters has been limited across the state, particularly for families.

Her organization estimates that more than 30,000 people in Massachusetts are experiencing homelessness even though official numbers are closer to 18,500.

Turley said Quincy and Worcester also saw high positivity rates among their homeless populations and could benefit from more testing and vaccinations once they become available.

In addition to Massachusetts, the Kaiser Family Foundation lists Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, and Oklahoma as states that are prioritizing the homeless population later on in the first phase of their rollout plans. The District of Columbia has also placed the population on the priority list behind frontline healthcare workers.