

# Shelter guests will begin to receive COVID-19 vaccines in late December, early January

Local Slider December 21, 2020 By Jordan Frias

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Vaccines against COVID-19 produced by Cambridge-based Moderna should start going to shelter guests at Pine Street Inn as early as next week or the first week of January.

Pine Street Inn President Lyndia Downie said Massachusetts is one of the few states that is prioritizing shelters for the unhoused in its rollout of a vaccine. Pine Street is expecting a shipment of about 100 vaccines this week.

The effort, she said, will be led by the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program (BHCHP).

Shelter guests will receive the vaccine based on risk category, as determined by a triage tool produced by Johns Hopkins University.

“[The tool] really prioritizes based on age, social economics, and high-risk conditions,” Downie said.

Staff will receive the treatment once the shelter is able to acquire more vaccines, which are in short supply.

Vaccinations should start over the next couple of weeks and will be administered on-site by BHCHP staff.

Some shelter guests seem to be eager to get vaccinated. Others have their worries.

Messaging will be important since vaccine hesitancy exists among the homeless population and the staff.

“Our guests are just like everybody else. They have questions about it. Some people are in a high-risk category and want the vaccine and are very worried about getting COVID,” Downie said.

Downie said Pine Street Inn will mount an educational campaign to encourage guests to get vaccinated.

“Even though we’ve de-crowded the shelters as much as possible and we’re trying very hard to maintain the spread, nevertheless, it’s still a congregate site.”

The shelter population has been particularly hard hit by the pandemic. According to Downie, the positivity rate at Pine Street was as high as 36 percent at the height of the spring outbreak. Most guests have been compliant with implemented COVID-19 restrictions, but some are still hesitant to get tested for the virus.

Those staying at the shelter would benefit from getting vaccinated, Downie said. She said many are older and are dealing with preexisting conditions.

She understands the “fear factor” that there may be around the vaccine, Downie said, but she is urging staff and residents to get vaccinated, saying it’s better than getting the virus.

“[T]here’s no question there’s some risk,” Downie said. “The question is how much risk against the worry about getting COVID.... I hope as more people get vaccinated and if more people can talk about the experience, it will help.”

Downie said BHCHP is working closely with the state’s Department of Public Health to get most guests vaccinated over a couple of months.

Follow up will be done with those getting the vaccine to ensure that they receive the second shot about four weeks after the first one, which is necessary for the two-part treatment to be effective. A tracking system will be put in place to help confirm that guests are properly immunized.

Downie called the vaccine “a small light” at the end of the tunnel, especially given the homeless population’s vulnerability to the virus.

“We are really extraordinarily grateful to the governor’s COVID task force and to [Health and Human Services Secretary] Marylou Sudders and her team for putting congregate shelters on the priority list because [COVID-19’s] been devastating,” Downie said.

“And we’re grateful that we will be able to make some headway on this. It’s going to take some time, but we’re thrilled that we got on this [priority] list.”



Jordan  
Frias

**Jordan Frias**

Jordan Frias is an editorial assistant at Boston Herald and a contributor of Spare Change News. He is vice president of the New England Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists and a graduate of Northeastern University's School of Journalism.