

Highlights from KFF Web Event: A Shot in the Arm for Long-Term Care Facilities? Early Lessons from the COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout to High Priority Populations

Overview

On January 14, 2021, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) held an online panel discussion about ongoing efforts to vaccinate high priority populations in long-term care (LTC) settings. The moderators and panelists reviewed the latest data on COVID-19 cases and deaths in LTC facilities and highlighted lessons learned that could be applied to future waves of the vaccine rollout. The panel was co-moderated by Tricia Neuman, a senior vice president at KFF and executive director of the Program on Medicare Policy, and Rachel Garfield, a vice president at KFF and co-director of the Program on Medicaid and the Uninsured. Priya Chidambaram, a senior policy analyst at KFF, presented key findings from the data. Panelists included Mark Parkinson, president and CEO of the American Health Care Association, Nicole Howell, executive director for the Ombudsman Services of Contra Costa, Solano, and Alameda Counties in California, Rina Shah, group vice president of Pharmacy Operations and Services at Walgreens, and Matthew Yarnell, president of SEIU Healthcare Pennsylvania and national chair of SEIU's Nursing Home Council. A full recording of the event can be found on KFF's [website](#).

Highlights

Priya Chidambaram

Ms. Chidambaram noted that as of January 5, 2020, approximately 131,000 deaths were reported in LTC facilities, accounting for about 38% of all COVID-19 deaths. Deaths in long-term care facilities have accounted for a disproportionate number of COVID-19 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic, although this share has decreased recently. Long-term care facilities were also impacted by the winter surge in COVID-19 cases and deaths.

Now that vaccination efforts are underway in long-term care facilities, KFF is focused on tracking a number of data trends. KFF will track how characteristics of long-term care facilities (i.e. rural or urban) and how the demographics of the residents of these facilities affect vaccination rates and other key metrics.

Mark Parkinson

Mr. Parkinson reemphasized that LTC residents make up an alarmingly large and disproportionate share of COVID-19 deaths, with LTC residents only accounting for about 1% of the population and nearly 40% of COVID-19 deaths. He stressed the importance of vaccinating LTC facility residents early, and noted the significant effect that prioritizing vaccines for LTC facility residents could have on COVID-19 death rates. Mr. Parkinson said that most states have so far performed admirably in their efforts to vaccinate LTC patients, with most states ahead of schedule to have all LTC patients vaccinated before March 1, 2021.

However, Mr. Parkinson also highlighted challenges encountered with the early vaccination efforts. He noted that vaccination rates among LTC staff and residents still vary widely by facility. He also explained ongoing concerns about the vaccine's side effects, often spurred by misinformation, still serve as a barrier to a 100% vaccination rate in LTC facilities. He argued that work must be done to learn from these challenges and apply lessons learned going forward.

Nicole Howell

Ms. Howell compared vaccination efforts in skilled nursing facilities (SNFs) with those in assisted living facilities. She noted that although vaccination rates are high in SNFs, residents in assisted living facilities still encounter a lot of misinformation, which is keeping vaccination rates down. She also explained that vaccine shortages complicate the process further, and said these shortages will continue to be a problem in future waves of the vaccine rollout.

To help effectively address these challenges, Ms. Howell suggested that LTC facilities should proactively combat misinformation, and that local health officials should leverage relationships with pharmacy partners to procure a greater supply of the vaccine and speed the vaccination process. She argued that local officials and health

entities should move forward with a collaborative mindset and be creative about how to get all their LTC patients vaccinated as quickly as possible.

Rina Shah

Ms. Shah noted that Walgreens is the vaccine provider for about 35,000 LTC facilities across the country, which is approximately half of all LTC facilities in the U.S. She believed that Walgreens' partnership with the federal and state governments has been key to the rapid vaccine distribution in LTC facilities, and explained that because of these partnerships, Walgreens is on track to meet its goal of vaccinating all LTC residents within 3-4 weeks of the launch of each state's vaccine program. She said 95% of all SNF residents will have their first vaccine dose by January 25.

Ms. Shah echoed Mr. Parkinson and Ms. Howell's concerns about vaccine mistrust. She noted that although LTC residents tend to be willing to take the vaccine, many LTC staff are often hesitant. Walgreens is trying to combat this by providing clinicians at vaccination sites to educate LTC staff and residents, which Ms. Shah says has been effective in combatting misinformation. She also noted additional challenges that have slowed vaccine uptake, including inclement winter weather in some states and difficulties in contacting LTC facilities. She said state partnerships were crucial for successes so far, and will continue to be crucial in scheduling vaccination opportunities in the LTC facilities that have not yet received the vaccine.

Matthew Yarnell

Mr. Yarnell noted that as COVID-19 case rates are high among LTC residents, case rates are equally high among LTC caregivers, highlighting the moral imperative to also prioritize LTC staff in vaccination plans. He argued that while pharmacy partnerships with states have been effective in achieving their goals, these partnerships often lack the perspective of LTC workers in their decision making. He said it would be beneficial to include LTC workers in the vaccination planning process, so that LTC workers can be vaccinated more quickly and go safely about their jobs.

Mr. Yarnell echoed concerns about vaccine hesitancy. He said that outreach efforts ought to be made, especially to LTC caregivers of color, to assure LTC staff of the safety and efficacy of the vaccines. Generally, Mr. Yarnell argued that better communication between LTC facilities and staff members will be essential, since LTC staff should know when they will be vaccinated, and that crucial safety supplies like personal protective equipment will be available to ensure their safety until they are vaccinated. Mr. Yarnell argued that by forming a closer relationship with LTC staff, these staff can be trusted partners for state governments and pharmacies to more efficiently roll out the vaccine. He also argued that there is still a lot of work to be done to combat workers' mistrust of their employers and government, and that prescriptive policies, such as mandated vaccination of LTC workers, would be a mistake.

At the end of the panel discussion and Q&A, Ms. Garfield said KFF will continue to work on developing best practices for vaccination efforts, and will track developments in the public's attitudes and experiences with COVID-19 vaccinations. KFF's [COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor](#) will be updated with this information on an ongoing basis as the vaccine rollout continues.