



Special Update on the COVID-19 Vaccine

Hello. I'm Terri Cunliffe, President and CEO of Covenant Living.

This has been a challenging year for all of us. After eight months of coping with a global pandemic, not one area of our personal lives, our professional lives or our corporate life has been left untouched. I think it is fair to say that no one could have imagined the scale of COVID-19's impact. Yet despite the challenges, you continue to demonstrate grace and determination – even as we grow weary of the protocols and disruptions to our day-to-day lives.

In recent weeks, there has been a lot of news about COVID-19 vaccines, and as soon as this promising news came out, I started receiving questions from residents, family members and employees, asking how and when our residents and staff would have access to the vaccine.

First, it should be noted that as of recording of this video on December 2, the Food and Drug Administration has not yet approved a COVID-19 vaccine for use in the United States. However, the FDA will meet on December 10 to review the Pfizer vaccine, which has already been approved for use in the United Kingdom, and on December 17 to review the Moderna vaccine. All of which is promising news.

Much like the early days of the pandemic, there are many unanswered questions as state and Federal officials work out the details for deploying the vaccine to 330 million anxious Americans. And while we still don't have specific answers regarding the timing for distribution of the vaccine to our residents and staff, we thought it important to share the most current information available from the Centers for Disease Control.

In early December, the CDC approved the recommendation that the initial round of vaccines will be available to healthcare personnel -- including nurses, doctors, and direct care givers -- and residents of long-term care facilities, likely focusing on Skilled Nursing and Assisted Living.

While this is the most current information, it is subject to change as the availability of the vaccine increases and distribution discussions continue.

We anticipate the next priority to be those individuals at high risk for COVID-19 -- including older adults and individuals with pre-existing conditions -- followed by essential workers and then the general public. Keep in mind the CDC has not provided specific dates for when the vaccine will be available to any of these groups.

Once the vaccine receives emergency-use approval from the FDA, the CDC will make final allocation recommendations to individual states, who will then determine who is given priority in their jurisdiction. The final decision is expected to come from the governors, who are ultimately responsible for implementing distribution plans in each state. It is our understanding that distribution priorities may be influenced by certain metrics, such as the positivity rate for a campus or county. If that is the case, then many of our communities could be placed at a lower priority due to our lower positivity rates. In addition, we have learned that Skilled Nursing residents are likely to receive the vaccine before residents in Assisted Living and Residential Living.

Keep in mind, the national media coverage does not necessarily reflect the situation in every community, county or even state. Just because the national media announces the vaccine is available, that does not mean it is immediately available in your community. And while we are a large national organization, the priority list for the vaccine will be determined by each state and further refined by each county.

But be assured, Covenant Living leadership has done everything we can to influence our priority ranking for receiving the vaccine. Every Covenant Living community has registered for the vaccine program as directed by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and the Department of Health and Human Services. We have designated Walgreens -- one of the pharmacies recommended by the Federal government and trade associations -- as the Covenant Living pharmacy of choice. And our leadership team continues to monitor day-to-day vaccine updates, just as we have monitored virus protocols throughout the year.

We understand that many of you are anxious to know when you will have access to the vaccine. Our plan is to keep you informed by video or written communication as soon as we have specific information about the timing for your community. Due to regulatory limitations, we will be contracting with an outside agency to provide access to the vaccine for Residential Living residents. Our hope is to coordinate access to the vaccine for our residents, but we encourage you to contact your personal physician to see if they can access the vaccine on your behalf.

While we wait for the vaccine, we are seeing a significant increase in the number of COVID-19 cases around the country. This is also reflected in the number of positive tests in Covenant Living communities, most of them coming from staff. During this time, it is critically important for all of us to remain vigilant in wearing our masks, washing our hands and maintaining physical distancing. I encourage you to stay home as much as possible and to limit your time spent indoors with anyone outside of your immediate household.

As we have learned over the course of the pandemic, we cannot promise that this information will not change, but we do promise to keep you up to date on the information we have.

I get it. We are all weary of being apart from one another. We are tired of wearing masks and eating out of to-go containers. And we still have a long way to go before the impact of this virus is over, but there is finally light at the end of the tunnel.

This new phase of hope – of waiting anxiously for access to the vaccine -- reminds me of waiting anxiously for Christmas as a child. Throughout the month of December, the anticipation of Christmas morning created a roller coaster of emotions. Periods of excitement were interspersed with temper tantrums when I couldn't rummage through the presents under the tree to count out how many were for me or how many were for my sisters.

I sense a similar situation as we await the vaccine. Hope for a better future is interspersed with impatience and frustration at "the wait."

Last Sunday, we recognized the start of Advent. Advent is a time of waiting, of expectation and hope. This year, we are all waiting, expecting and hoping for an end to the COVID-19 pandemic. We wait for and expect a safe and effective vaccine. We look forward with hope to a return to normal life, to not have to worry about getting too close to people, to be able to gather again with family and friends, to travel, and to worship and praise God in person instead of virtual. We wait with hope for the opportunity to visit our loved ones in Skilled Nursing and Assisted Living without the worry that we may be carrying the virus.

As we await and hope for the end of the coronavirus pandemic, let us even more importantly remember the real meaning of Christmas: Jesus is the reason for the season.

In closing, I encourage you to remember the words of Paul in Romans 12:12, "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction and faithful in prayer."

Blessings on you throughout this Advent season.