

January 4, 2021

California COVID-19 Community Vaccine Advisory Committee

Thank you for the critical work the COVID-19 Community Vaccine Advisory Committee is undertaking and for inviting public comments.

The Acupuncture Now Foundations is a California based international non-profit dedicated to educating the public, health care providers and healthcare policy makers about the practice of acupuncture. I am writing to urge your committee to not overlook those healthcare providers working in private practice, including Licensed Acupuncturists, who don't have affiliations with hospitals or large medical groups where they would have the opportunity for early tier COVID-19 vaccination.

During this crisis, California's 13,000 Licensed Acupuncturists are in even greater demand as many medical providers are limiting the patients they see and services they provide including for those with chronic pain. These limits combined with the limits to prescribing pain medications due to the opioid crisis have left many people desperate to find health care providers willing to see them who can ease their pain; something acupuncture is well known to do. Licensed Acupuncturists are filling a critical void by providing care to these patients but are not being formally recognized by policymakers as essential healthcare providers worthy of early vaccination consideration.

Although California Licensed Acupuncturists are legally considered to be "primary care providers" they were not specified in the list put together by California's State Public Health Officer of "Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers" under the section of "Health Care/ Public Health"¹. While this list was not intended to be all inclusive, this oversight, together with the fact that nearly 90% of Licensed Acupuncturists work in private practice without hospital affiliations, gives no clear path for these health care providers to obtain early tier COVID-19 vaccinations. In December, 2020, the Acupuncture Society of New York had to go to their state Supreme Court to get New York Licensed Acupuncturists formally recognized as essential health care workers.

As some of your committee members may not be familiar with the role Licensed Acupuncturists serve in our healthcare system I offer a few examples: In 2020, acupuncture was approved as a treatment for chronic low back pain under Medicare and the Whole Veteran Act was passed. That legislation includes acupuncture as one of the services under review for accessibility and availability in the report to be delivered to Congress by the Department of Veterans Affairs. A program by Kaiser Permanente of Southern California has been referring thousands of chronic pain patients to a network of Licensed Acupuncturists for over 10 years. Many of these patients responded poorly to conventional pain management approaches but have been found to respond well to acupuncture². I personally treat dozens of these patients a week and don't know what will become of them if I am unable to keep my practice open due to COVID-19 exposure.

¹ <https://covid19.ca.gov/essential-workforce/>

² <https://www.ashcompanies.com/Resource/WhitePapers>

Although seldom recognized, Licensed Acupuncturists are out there in the trenches, giving hands-on care treating people suffering from intractable pain whose physicians may be unable to see them or even prescribe stronger pain medications. Having the opportunity to be vaccinated during the same timeframe as other essential healthcare providers will help Licensed Acupuncturists keep their practices open and to continue to provide their badly needed services. And the same could be said for other care providers that work primarily in private practice settings such as Chiropractors.

I urge this committee to recommend Licensed Acupuncturists be approved as Phase 1A Tier B or C category. I also strongly recommend that the best way to get the word out regarding vaccination Tier assignments and resources to Licensed Acupuncturists or similar providers is via their state licensing boards. In California these licensing boards, including the California Acupuncture Board³, operate under the California Department of Consumer Affairs.

I thank you again for the very difficult work your committee is taking-on making almost “Sophie’s choice” decisions about what stage different groups will have vaccinations available to them. I am not asking for special consideration for Licensed Acupuncturists, only that they be recognized as being just as essential as the many other categories of healthcare providers and support staff already specified as such.

Sincerely,

Matthew Bauer, L.Ac.
President, The Acupuncture Now Foundation
www.acunow.org
mbauer@acunow.org

³ <https://www.acupuncture.ca.gov/>