



VIRGINIA
FUNERAL DIRECTORS
ASSOCIATION

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November 20, 2020

Honorable Ralph S. Northam
Governor, Commonwealth of Virginia
Post Office Box 1475
Richmond, Virginia 23218

Re: Take Action Now – Make Funeral Directors a Priority for COVID-19 Vaccine

Dear Governor Northam:

These last few months have been exceptionally challenging for all of us in the state of Virginia. We applaud the critical steps Virginia has taken at your directive to limit the spread of COVID-19; to mitigate the impact of illness, suffering and death; and to sustain critical infrastructure and key resources. In particular we are grateful for all you have done to keep funeral directors safe as they carry out their sacred duties on the front lines of this pandemic.

There is another key decision on the horizon – **vaccine allocation** – that significantly impacts the well-being of funeral directors.

Due to the high-risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus, I urge you to include deathcare workers in the top-tier of essential services to receive a vaccine when it becomes available. Doing so protects the health, not only deathcare professionals, but the entire community in which they work.

Deathcare professionals face the same risk of exposure to COVID-19 as healthcare workers when they enter hospitals, nursing homes, and residences to take the body of a decedent into their care; as they meet with surviving family members who may have been exposed to the coronavirus; and as they prepare the bodies of pandemic victims for burial or cremation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, deathcare professionals have provided critical services by caring for the dead and their grieving families, but they cannot continue to do so safely without priority access to an approved vaccine.

In early October, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, at the request of the CDC and NIH, released a framework to inform decisions made by health authorities, including the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), as they create and implement national and/or local guidelines for COVID-19 vaccine allocation. **The final framework puts funeral directors in Phase 1a for vaccine allocation, which is the phase for high-risk healthcare workers**, and is based, in-part, on the Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency designation of funeral professionals as critical infrastructure workers. (CISA Critical Infrastructure Worker Guidance: <https://www.cisa.gov/publication/guidance-essential-critical-infrastructure-workforce>; NASEM Vaccine Allocation Framework: <http://nap.edu/25917>.)

Prioritizing deathcare workers is not without precedent. In 2008, when facing the H1N1 pandemic, the CDC elevated "Mortuary Service Providers" to the Tier II level for vaccine prioritization. There were six tiers to the system, with the most critical workers and personnel in Tiers I, II, and III.

As you determine how Virginia will distribute of its allocation of vaccine doses from the federal government, we ask that funeral professionals be prioritized with healthcare workers.

On behalf of our members and the deathcare professionals in Virginia, we are grateful for your leadership and stand ready, as always, to care for the dead and the families left behind.

Sincerely,

Lacy S. Whittaker
Executive Director
Virginia Funeral Directors Association