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February 9, 2021

Diana Espinoza
Acting Administrator
Health Resources and Services Administration
The Department of Health and Human Services
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857

Dear Acting Administrator Espinoza-

I write today to applaud the recent announcement that the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) will be supplying doses of COVID-19 vaccine to 250 HRSA-funded Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) starting the week of February 15th as part of the Biden-Harris Administration's overall efforts to ensure equitable distribution of the vaccine. I strongly urge you to include FQHCs in Erie and Niagara Counties in New York State among the health centers selected for this distribution.

My district is home to three Federally Qualified Health Centers: Community Health Center of Buffalo, Jericho Road Ministries, and Neighborhood Health Center of WNY. A fourth center, Evergreen Health, was also recently designated a FQHC Look-Alike. All four centers have played a vital role for decades in providing health care and other services to tens of thousands of low-income individuals and families in Buffalo and Niagara Falls, many of whom come from communities of color, are refugees, or are experiencing homelessness.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not affected all communities in New York equally. For example, Black New Yorkers make up 14 percent of the population, but have thus far accounted for 23 percent of all COVID deaths in the state. Similarly, Hispanic or Latino New Yorkers are 19 percent of the population, but account for 24 percent of COVID deaths.¹ In Erie and Niagara Counties, the ZIP codes hardest hit by COVID are those whose residents are majority people of color and are disproportionately low-income.² These are precisely the communities Buffalo's FQHCs are dedicated to serving, and that they are uniquely positioned to reach.

COVID-19 vaccine distribution is a racial justice issue. New Yorkers of color already lag significantly behind their white peers when it comes to receiving the vaccine. Everyone age 65 and older in New York State is currently eligible to receive the vaccine, but while Black New

¹ <https://covidtracking.com/race/dashboard>

² <https://blogs.cornell.edu/highroadpolicy/2020/09/09/communities-of-color-being-hit-hardest-by-covid-19-in-erie-county/>

Yorkers make up 13 percent of that population, only 4 percent have gotten at least one dose of the vaccine. Hispanic or Latino New Yorkers account for 12 percent of that population, but the number of who have gotten the vaccine is just 5 percent.³

FQHCs are trusted providers in their communities, and leveraging the existing relationships they have with patients who may not otherwise have access to health care and who may be historically mistrustful of our health care system will be key in getting folks in these hard-to-reach communities vaccinated. I therefore strongly urge you to include FQHCs in Erie and Niagara counties as part of HRSA's vaccine distribution effort to health centers.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Brian Higgins". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Brian Higgins
Member of Congress

³ <https://covid19vaccine.health.ny.gov/covid-19-vaccine-tracker>