



May 2, 2021

Honorable Committee on Health and Human Services Members, Senate Majority Leader LIBBY, Representative TALBOT ROSS, Senator CLAXTON, Senator DAUGHTRY, President JACKSON, Senator VITELLI and Representatives BROOKS, CLOUTIER, CRAVEN and, MEYER

My name is Lisa Tapert. I am the CEO of the Maine Mobile Health Program (MMHP) and I am here to testify in favor of LD 1077: Resolve, To Promote Equity in COVID-19 Immunizations.

MMHP is the state's all-mobile federally qualified health center designated to serve the migrant and seasonal workers that are the backbone of Maine's agricultural economy. Our patients prepare, plant, pick, and process the state's farm products including blueberries, apples, broccoli, Christmas trees and wreathes, seafood, eggs and milk. For over 25 years, MMHP has provided culturally and linguistically accessible health care to farmworkers where they live and work.

COVID 19 has been devastating for the country's farmworkers. In Maine, every step has been a fight, as we, together with racially and ethnically based organizations, have pleaded with the state to recognize and truly prioritize people of color. In the early days of testing and vaccination efforts the state lacked data on racial and ethnic minorities and didn't prioritize tracking this data until advocates, like MMHP, MEJ and the ACLU, raised the alarm.

Other states have vaccinated large numbers of farmworkers—recognizing the disproportionate risk these workers faced, but in Maine, farm workers received no advanced access. Initially, essential farm workers were designated for early access due to congregate living and working situations. However, when the age-based approach swept in, we sat on our hands and watched new outbreaks in farmworker communities—most recently among dairy workers. Our first vaccine clinic for farmworkers was the second week in April despite vaccine availability starting in December.

Vaccine hesitancy, already high in the farmworker community, has been badly exacerbated after the Johnson & Johnson pause and we are still picking up the pieces. The most challenging element is upcoming—promoting the vaccine now that early adopters have been vaccinated. The Johnson & Johnson pause had and continues to have a massive impact on communities of color.

The State should be a partner in ensuring that these communities have the information, resources and access they need to stay healthy and safe as the pandemic continues. This can only be done by listening to communities and to organizations, like MMHP. Tailored outreach and education to vulnerable populations required in LD 1077 will be essential during the next phase. Maine must proactively include communities of color in planning that promotes racial equity and LD 1077 is a place to ensure this happens.