

**Testimony for the Health Public Oversight Roundtable
District's COVID-19 Vaccination Process
Friday, January 29, 2021**

To: Committee on Health Chairman Vince Gray, Committee on Health members, and Committee Staff

From: Gaby Fraser, PAVE Parent and Ward 7 Resident

Date: February 11, 2021

Good morning Councilmember Gray and members of the Committee on Health. My name is Gaby L. Fraser, and while I am not a Washingtonian, I have lived in DC for forty-five years. I am a proud Ward 7 resident, a Mother of three Teachers (Distant Learning Teachers that is) Grandmother to eleven (11) Grandchildren: (3) at Two Rivers Public Charter School and (1) at Kelly Miller, in DC. 4 attending Maryland schools, one (1) in Tennessee; and (2) under the age of three. I serve on the PAVE Citywide Board and I am a Ward 7 PLE Member.

It is extremely important to me that I testify today and share with you my concerns and experiences with the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine. I don't have to tell you that the city did not equitably distribute the vaccine, because it goes without saying! The disparity that exists in the District of Columbia covers everything from food deserts, to the way the vaccine was distributed to residents of color 65 and older, and in my estimation, one of the most important disparities, to the disparity across the city regarding education, resources and tools for children of color and at-risk and underserved populations.

January 2021 marked the one-year anniversary of the first COVID-19 cases in the United States. As of February 10, 2021, the pandemic has infected more than 107M people and more than 2 1/2million people have died. More than 474,034 COVID-19 related deaths have occurred within the United States, and in the District, 965 residents have lost their lives. Wards 7 & 8 are leading the city as number two and three in COVID related deaths. The pandemic is responsible for the temporary, and more often than not, permanent closures of many businesses; the inability of millions to pay rent, buy food, and pay bills due to chronic joblessness; the unprecedented switch to distant learning, from Pre-kindergarten/4 through colleges and universities; the disparities in the Black and Brown communities regarding the COVID-19 vaccine and how it is being distributed, just to name a few.

I tried unsuccessfully half a dozen times to call the COVID-19 appointment line at 9:00AM and 8:00AM, Thursdays and Fridays, as advertised, to schedule an appointment. Should I even mention that I signed up for both text and e-mail alerts! Normally an alert is given prior to an event so that you have an opportunity to prepare and address it. What is the purpose of receiving an alert if you don't receive it until it's too late to act upon? Well, I did receive the text and e-mail alerts... 15-20 minutes after the opening of the appointment phone lines. If I had relied on the alerts, I would never have been able to schedule an appointment because all appointments would have been filled. As it was, I did call at the exact times. I was told that once that 525 people were ahead of me. Fifteen minutes later the prompt said there are no more appointments available, however I could stay on the line to speak with the scheduler. Why would I wait to speak with the scheduler if there were no appointments left? Another time I called, and I was told there were 125 people ahead of me. Forty-five minutes later the phone just disconnected. That was just two of the calls that I distinctly remembered. I'm very lucky because I did receive my first dose and I will get my second dose in February. I was able to receive the vaccine because I am a patient of George Washington University Hospital. Otherwise, I'd probably still be trying to get through on the phone to schedule an appointment!

I was very fortunate to have jobs that required me to use a computer on a daily basis. However, a lot of my Senior counterparts do not have a computer, do not know how to use a computer, or are not comfortable with a computer. The only alternative for these Seniors is to call to schedule an appointment. In order to reach those individuals most in need, we must develop a better plan of outreach and communication to these Seniors. In Wards 2 and 3, nearly 3 times more DC residents aged 65 and older have received their first dose, compared with the number of residents in Wards 7 and 8. In many cultures, Seniors are revered and would not be treated this way. In the District, ALL residents should be treated equally, regardless of race, income, social standing, education, or knowledge of technology.

Now is the time to address and revise the disparities and the equitable distribution. I shudder to think about what will occur when the vaccine becomes available to the remaining residents of the District (64 and under), which is a very large population! As a rule, some young people are not as understanding, as tolerable, or patient as we are. We must develop alternate means of scheduling appointments.

It seems that just as with the educational divide across the city, vaccine information across the city needs to be redefined. While I am disappointed, quite frankly I'm not surprised! The

District's approach to the distribution of the vaccine for people of color is just as bad as equitable funding for schools and communities with our youth of color across the Wards. Citywide, 74% of residents who have died from the coronavirus are Black, and the District's population is 46% Black!

I would like to suggest perhaps I partnering with churches, and even grocery stores, places where District residents go on a regular basis. Partnering with schools is another way to get the word out. Due to COVID-19, a lot of homes now have laptops due to distant learning, however they have basic cable and while the bandwidth is not very strong, it is a possible option to consider. Children are online from 9 to 3 every day except for Wednesday and there could be a special time, either at the beginning of classes, or at the end. Where a message can go out to Parents and inform them about various avenues to sign up to get the vaccine. Something has to be done because the present method is clearly not working.

We all know that President Biden and Vice President Harris were left with a dismal COVID-19 vaccine plan. They had to start from scratch. I believe we need to think outside the box and explore additional ways to get the word out and ensure that all residents across the city are treated equally when it comes to equitably scheduling and receiving the vaccine.

Once again, thank you Chairman Gray and Councilmembers Allen, Cheh, Henderson, and Nadeau for allowing me to submit my written testimony and share with you my concerns and experiences. It is important that all residents of the District of Columbia are treated equally, regardless of race, income, social standing, education, knowledge of technology, or are an at-risk or underserved child or adult.

Thank you,

Gaby Fraser

Ward 7 resident