

The following is an Op-ed written by the Chesterfield County Chair Jim Holland and Vice Chair Chris Winslow to advocate for Chesterfield County residents to obtain the COVID-19 vaccine. It appeared in the Richmond Times-Dispatch on Saturday, Jan. 23, 2021.

State continues to shun local governments' needs

By Jim Holland and Chris Winslow

As state officials issue directives regarding eligibility and supplies for distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine, Virginia localities remain stymied by state bureaucracy. The front lines of local government are where the citizens first reach out and first are heard. Their cries to us are unparalleled to anything we've experienced.

We deeply are empathetic, yet we have been rendered helpless. We want to help but are denied a seat at the table. We feel we are unfairly treated by the commonwealth and have to follow its orders but on this issue, we have run out of patience and tolerance. This is beyond frustrating because our citizens deserve better.

For months, the world has heard promises of a coming vaccine whose rollout would quicken a return to lives once lived. Footage of the first delivery trucks leaving the dock gave hope and sparked a light at the end of a very long and dark tunnel.

Virginia has far too many doses still not administered and that's not the fault of the federal government. Further, pursuant to the "use it or lose it" federal rules, Virginia will not receive more doses until this stockpile has been administered.

Meanwhile, our people have waited, and waited — including our most vulnerable. More than 50% of our deaths have been for those older than 80 years old, and more than 90% are older than age 60. Why these families are waiting further is beyond stressful for them and their loved ones. Every dose of vaccine that still is sitting in a freezer and not being put in the arm of a citizen represents another potential victim of this deadly virus.

Why Virginians are waiting longer than other states' treatment of older adults shouldn't be tolerated. Why Chesterfield County citizens are waiting longer than other parts of Virginia needs to be better managed by the executive branch to be equitable or fair. Why the commonwealth would add anyone to any eligibility list without supplies available creates confusion.

The state's only delegated power to us is vaccinating government and school employees under Phases 1a and 1b. Yet, our order of 8,000 doses to complete Phase 1a and start Phase 1b from days ago resulted in a paltry 1,000 doses received, cancelling many appointments, mostly for our teachers. For many, this is a promise broken.

That's not how it should be. Through school nurses, paramedics and other county employees, we have the ability to provide the first dose to eligible members of our workforce within a few weeks. However, at this current and unacceptable pace, it will take many months to achieve that goal.

On this issue, we are 100% dependent upon the state to take care of our citizens. Rightful confusion exists when residents hear the name "Chesterfield Health District" and think the

district locally is managed. While they are great and hard-working employees, they are 100% under the oversight of the executive branch.

They are doing all they have been permitted to do. Yet the resources aren't provided locally nor at the state level. Why call centers take two hours of waiting for our citizens with simple questions is beyond explanation.

This confusion will continue unless addressed — and it must be addressed now. For example, we might be in a position defined at the federal level and adhered to by the state to vaccinate our inmates prior to some in our community. We have not had a COVID-19 case among inmates in our jail since June because of our adherence to standards of care. However, 193 have died outside of our jail. Again, this is not equitable or fair.

Simply put, the vaccine administration program wholly is defective. We could continue our critique; however, we're more interested in making a difference for citizens. We want to help and have begun the work to identify sites for mass vaccinations, assist with logistical support, and to identify the distribution networks of health care providers, pharmacies and urgent care centers that are instrumental for COVID-19 testing.

They already are designed to reach the masses and take pressure off a state institution, yet they also sit on the sidelines with patients asking them why. Why indeed.

A year after the nation's first COVID-19 case was reported and following an unequalled scientific quest to develop a vaccine, what might be left of hope remains just that, hope. Hope that citizens can continue enduring the pandemic's attack on their health and freedom. Hope that the production and distribution of the vaccine will quicken. And, hope that the vaccine produced will end up in people's arms. Without hope, frustration mounts, and that's where we are.

We implore Gov. Ralph Northam and the Virginia Department of Health to reconsider how localities help get us to the end of the tunnel. We also look for the commonwealth to be accountable to its people.

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