

PA lawmakers battle to give counties control of vaccine slated for mass clinics

Marion Callahan March 25, 2021 Bucks County Courier Times

Pennsylvania lawmakers are pushing through legislation that would require the state to give the four Philadelphia collar counties — Bucks, Chester, Montgomery and Delaware — control over the weekly 42,000 doses of Johnson & Johnson vaccine slated to be split between two southeastern PEMA vaccination sites, local officials said.

The changes, outlined in amendments to House Bill 63, would give leaders of all four suburban counties control over the location and the supply of vaccine doses earmarked for the PEMA mass clinics. The changes would only apply to Bucks, Montgomery, Chester and Delaware counties.

"It would give sole authority over the state mass vaccination sites to these counties," said Rep. Meghan Schroeder, of Bucks County, who sponsored the amendment to Rep. John Lawrence's bill HB63 which was up for third consideration in the House Wednesday. "Bucks has a county board of health, local experts on public health who have the resources to run these state mass sites but just need that authority to do so."

The changes, introduced by Lawrence, R-Chester, and Schroeder come a week after county leaders in all four suburbs and local elected officials asked state health officials to reconsider plans for two mass vaccination clinic in the southeast, one slated for Montgomery Mall and the other for Cheyney University.

The leaders prefer that the doses go to existing county-run clinics in the four counties that are ready to deliver shots in large volumes but are too

short on supply to operate at capacity. Schroeder said that once the amendment passes the House, it heads to the Senate, then if it gets passed without changes, it heads to the governor.

"The goal is to get the shots to the counties so they can run these state mass sites," said Schroeder, who represents the 29th district in Central Bucks.

The amended legislation states: "The governing board of each affected county shall have sole authority to designate a location or locations to be utilized as a mass vaccination site or sites within the county and shall coordinate with the appropriate county health department for the delivery and administration of COVID-19 vaccines at each mass vaccination site."

So far, the state health department has released few details on the planned mass sites.

"Discussions among state, county and legislative officials are ongoing and we will make an announcement as soon as details are finalized," said health department spokesman Barry Ciccocioppo. "The need for state support, such as operational guidance and staffing, will vary by location. We hope that operations will begin no later than mid-April, but that will depend not only on finalizing logistics regarding location and staffing, but also on vaccine allotments."

He did not confirm the location of the sites, but said the suburbs would be provided with two clinics, splitting 42,000 doses per week of the one-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine. He did not say how registration will work or how residents can schedule appointments.

The mass sites plan is part of a state initiative to accelerate vaccination rates and meet President Joe Biden's May 1 goal of making all adults eligible for a vaccine.

Wolf earlier this month announced the state would partner with the federal government to create 27 mass vaccination sites across the commonwealth, and set a goal to get all 1A eligible residents scheduled for their vaccine by March 31.

When news of the mass sites was released last week, elected officials from Bucks, Montgomery, Delaware and Chester counties met with state health department leaders, arguing that the counties would rather have direct vaccine allocations to use at existing clinics, which are unable to work at full capacity because of supply shortages.

Bucks County Commissioner Bob Harvie said more than 100,000 county residents who are eligible and pre-registered on its portal are still waiting for the vaccine. Harvie said leaders in all counties want to distribute the Johnson & Johnson vaccine to the counties, which already have established distribution sites and registered residents.

It is unclear whether the amendments would affect plans to open one of the sites being planned for the former Sears at the Montgomery Mall.

While Gov. Wolf said the planned sites would not take away any existing vaccine supply from the counties, Harvie said the state's new streamlined distribution plan, giving more vaccine to fewer providers, cuts off two neighborhood hospitals, Lower Bucks Hospital and Grand View Hospital from the state's vaccine supply channel.

In a joint statement to the state signed by leaders of all four counties, local officials expressed frustration.

"We are extremely disappointed to hear that PA DoH is not considering our request to allocate the Johnson and Johnson vaccine directly to Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery counties. We have reiterated our concerns about establishing a regional PEMA site for many reasons, and we remain deeply concerned that equitable distribution will be compromised at such a site."