

September 29, 2021

Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP)  
1600 Clifton Road  
Atlanta, GA 30329  
Docket No. CDC-2021-0075

To the Committee:

Americans living in rural America are growing increasingly concerned about the prospects of an upcoming “twindemic” in which we face the possibility of a continued threat from COVID-19 in combination with an active influenza and pneumonia season.

In an opinion piece I recently wrote for *The Hill*, I outlined the many barriers rural Americans already face in protecting themselves against illness. I have included the key excerpt below:

“Rural Americans have been some of the hardest hit by the pandemic. According to the USDA’s Economic Research Service, rural Americans are more vulnerable to severe illness or death from COVID-19 than urban residents due to factors such as underlying health problems, older age and lack of health insurance. These factors are only worsened because nearly a quarter of rural residents live in counties with high mortality due to underlying medical conditions, almost eight times greater than the rate for urban residents. Additionally, many rural residents live in counties where they are vulnerable because of distance to an intensive care hospital — 35 times greater than the percentage for urban residents.

“With 93 percent of high-distance counties being rural, living far from intensive care hospitals means those Americans will face an even greater challenge in accessing care when they need it. Adding to this geographic challenge is the fact that since 2005, 181 rural hospitals have closed permanently across the United States.

“As more Americans embraced virtual physician/patient visits over the past year and a half, this too has proven difficult for many living in rural communities given the lack of high-speed internet. More than 14 million Americans across the country, including nearly one in five rural Americans, continue to lack access to high-speed broadband. This not only prohibits virtual visits but also makes it harder to make appointments for COVID-19 vaccinations and testing”.

While certainly more challenging for those living in rural areas, we know that keeping up with routine check-ups and vaccinations could mean life and death for so many vulnerable Americans.

Given the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) recent approval of two new vaccines for pneumonia, which cover more variants of the virus than the currently available vaccines, our communities are eager to gain access to this broader protection.

During a normal year, 50,000 Americans will die from pneumonia and we cannot predict how that number could increase when paired with a pandemic. Rural Americans deserve to have every possible protection against this deadly virus.

Attached to this letter are a few of the recent letters we've received from Grange members who have expressed their hope for access to these new vaccines ahead of this year's flu and pneumonia season.

On behalf of these and all of our fellow rural Americans, we implore the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) to expedite this process and ensure the at-risk population and vulnerable Americans across the country age 50 and over will have access to the most effective vaccines before the flu and pneumonia season is underway.

We thank ACIP for the ongoing commitment to protecting Americans against COVID-19 and appreciate all of the progress that has already been made in ensuring access to effective, preventative vaccines to protect ourselves.

That National Grange remains committed to continuing to urge all Americans to take the necessary steps to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in their communities. Just as we are laser-focused on increasing COVID-19 vaccination rates, we must remain diligent in ensuring we are using every tool available to protect against the repercussions of a "twindemic". With your help, we can increase our chances of protecting those most vulnerable in our communities against pneumonia this year as well.

Respectfully,

Betsy Huber, President  
National Grange

### **Grange Member Letters**

Please consider urging the federal and state governments to make these flu and pneumonia vaccines available immediately to our rural communities. As a Registered Nurse in a rural community I know first hand how important it is to get these vaccines out to the people who need them most, our elderly and immunocompromised patients in rural areas. In addition to making these vaccines available to these communities, it is vital for there to be the flexibility and opportunity for funding vaccinators to go door to door if they have to, to vaccinate those patients that are home bound.

Thank you,

Heidi Jimenez RN

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I am currently vaccinated for bacteria pneumonia but there has not been a vaccine for the virus version. If that becomes available it would be a game changer. I support any research and approval of this and hope you do as well. My older brother died from Srep pneumonia at the age of 40 so I am particularly sensitive to the disease.

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To Whom it May Concern:

Please do all you can to ensure that Americans have access to the best possible flu vaccines in this coming season. The efforts to mitigate Covid-19 last year reduced our exposure to flu viruses last year; now they will pose a bigger threat to us this year.

Your advocacy is much appreciated,

Richard Irwin  
Vermont Grange 248