August 18, 2021

The Honorable Xavier Becerra  
Secretary, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20201  

Dear Secretary Becerra:

Like all Americans, AARP’s 38 million members urgently want to see an end to the COVID-19 pandemic. Older Americans in particular have paid a heavy toll since the pandemic began. As you consider the possibility of offering booster shots, we urge you to develop a comprehensive roll-out plan that communicates clear information to the public and prioritizes older Americans, especially those who are homebound or living in congregate settings.

It is absolutely critical that older Americans know where and how they can get a booster shot. During the initial rollout of the vaccines, there was significant confusion and anxiety among older Americans as they struggled to make appointments. AARP heard from thousands of people who could not access or navigate the various online systems, had to compete for appointments, or tried calling into poorly-staffed hotlines. The experience left many people frustrated and disappointed. These problems cannot be repeated. We urge you to develop a centralized, user-friendly website to help people find out when they are eligible for a booster shot, where booster shots are available in their communities, and how to book their appointments. In addition, HHS should work with states to create well-functioning call centers to help those individuals who do not have internet access or cannot navigate an online system. We also urge you to provide clear information to the public in appropriate languages and formats. AARP has been very active in every state educating our members and the public about the vaccines, and we would welcome continued opportunities to assist HHS in this effort.

As with the previous round of vaccinations, we anticipate that states will be doing much of the on-the-ground work with significant support and guidance from the federal government. We urge HHS to provide clear guidance to states that outlines what their responsibilities are; what technical support or financial assistance is available to them; where vaccines are currently being sent in their states; how to add additional vaccination locations; and recommendations for prioritizing at-risk populations. AARP believes that states should prioritize any future booster rollout to the general public based on the order of delivery of the initial vaccinations. This must include prioritizing people age 50 and older, especially those living in congregate settings.
During the first round of COVID-19 vaccinations, many states utilized mass vaccination sites to administer shots. However, most of those sites have now closed and doses have been moved to other health care settings. It is imperative that consumers have accurate information about where vaccine booster shots are available in their communities. Where possible, health care settings already frequented by older Americans, such as pharmacies and offices of primary care providers, should be able to administer booster shots.

For those individuals most at risk, such as people living in nursing homes or other congregate facilities, homebound individuals, and other hard-to-reach populations, we urge HHS to develop specific plans with states to ensure boosters are delivered quickly and effectively. During the initial vaccine rollout, there were federal resources provided to states to develop solutions for vaccinating homebound individuals, and we urge you to continue those efforts. We also urge you to work with the states remaining that do not have programs in place to vaccinate homebound individuals to create such programs immediately.

States must ensure that vaccination-related data – including booster shots – are publicly available, easily accessible, and include enough granularity to allow for the identification of populations that are still struggling to access COVID-19 vaccines. The availability of such data will help ensure that no population is overlooked.

Finally, we greatly appreciate the requirements under the CARES Act and related federal laws that made initial COVID-19 vaccinations available at no cost to the public and without regard to an individual’s health coverage status. This policy undoubtedly increased take-up of the vaccines across the country. Our understanding is that future COVID-19 vaccine booster shots, whether they take the form of additional doses of existing vaccines or vaccines specifically adapted to target COVID-19 variants, will similarly be provided free of charge under existing law. Should additional legislation or regulations be required to keep this policy in place, we call upon Congress and the Administration to make this a top priority.

We again appreciate your leadership and stand ready to work with you and other federal and state government partners to address these challenges. Together, we can defeat this virus and help ensure a brighter future for Americans of all ages.

Sincerely,

Nancy A. LeaMond
Executive Vice President and
Chief Advocacy and Engagement Officer