

# Lawmaker 'stunned' by state's silence on funeral director vaccinations

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More than 100 lawmakers who asked Gov. Charlie Baker two weeks ago to join 33 other states in prioritizing funeral workers for COVID-19 vaccinations have, yet, to receive a reply, prompting puzzlement from a lawmaker who led the effort and offending those in the business.

“I’m very stunned there has been no reply,” state Rep. Sally Kerans, D-Danvers, said Wednesday, adding that morticians are still inexplicably the

only “COVID-facing” professionals left off the state’s phase one vaccination list.

“I can’t help, but think there’s a bias toward end-of-life care somewhere in the administration,” said C.R. Lyons, president of the Massachusetts Funeral Directors Association.

Lyons and colleagues have been petitioning Baker for more than a month to get bumped up to phase one of the state’s vaccination list.

Yet, despite guidance from multiple federal agencies that has led 33 other states to make such a move, Baker has, yet, to reply to the association’s entreaties — or to answer a Jan. 14 letter from numerous lawmakers, including many in Worcester County, sent on its behalf.

“The silence speaks volumes to us in terms of the way we’re not respected by (health officials),” Lyons said. “It’s discouraging not only that (Baker) has not responded to this group of constituents that are doing serious work at a serious time, but he’s also ignoring his Legislature.”

The funeral industry’s frustration is compounded by reports that only about half of the nearly 880,000 doses shipped so far in Massachusetts had been administered as of Sunday.

The Boston Globe reported Wednesday that Northeastern University alone had 2,000 doses — the same number Lyons estimates could go a long way in the funeral business — still on ice.

Logistical challenges, as well as unanticipated levels of resistance among some eligible in phase one, has contributed to the backlog, the Globe reported, while there are also many vaccines being reserved for the requisite second doses.

Lyons said funeral directors would jump at the chance to get at some of the unused supply, if Baker would just give the green light.

As it stands, morticians — who are traveling to high-risk areas of nursing homes and hospitals to collect virus victims, and embalming many of them — are behind “non-COVID-facing” health officials like podiatrists and acupuncturists in the state’s vaccine pecking order.

When the Telegram & Gazette first raised the issue with administration officials last week, the communications director for the state’s COVID-19 command center issued a general comment about experts consulted for the plan, and also appeared to suggest it conformed with CDC guidelines.

Spokesperson Kate Reilly did not answer a follow-up question about an apparent discrepancy between that statement and CDC recommendations cited by lawmakers and funeral directors.

Kerans said Wednesday that she can’t help, but wonder, whether the state’s silence stems from a realization that there’s no logical explanation for the snub.

“You almost get the feeling they’re kind of covering their ears and not wanting to listen,” she said. “I think that’s where the funeral directors are frustrated, and honestly feeling a little disrespected that their role in protecting public health is not being acknowledged, appreciated or valued.”

Funeral directors, in addition to quickly removing bodies from morgues or nursing homes, are also called to unattended deaths in homes along with police and firefighters who have already been vaccinated.

“When we get a call at 2 a.m., we get up and we go,” said Lyons, adding that he, within the past week, has spoken to a funeral director who got very sick after contracting the virus.

Lyons said there have been a number of situations where smaller funeral homes have had to “essentially shut down,” following outbreaks among staff.

He said he could not conceive of a reason why his profession doesn't deserve to be in phase one. If there is one, he said, Baker has an obligation to provide it.

"You owe us an explanation as to why we're the only COVID-facing group that is not in phase one," he said. "I think they've got nothing to say because they know we're right."

Kerans and state Sen. Anne M. Gobi, D-Spencer — who co-wrote the Jan. 14 letter — each said Wednesday they understand state officials are dealing with a very difficult crisis with many moving parts.

But both said they, at a minimum, would have expected a letter back from Baker by now explaining his position.

The state declined to make an administration official familiar with the governor's thinking on the issue available for an interview Thursday.

Reilly said Thursday afternoon that she was working on a response to a set of questions the T&G sent the day before.

The state on Wednesday rolled out a registration process for residents 75 and older that has, thus far, been heavily criticized.

Kerans said she believes morticians deserve attention, too.

"They're still doing their jobs, encountering the risk of infection," she said. "I guess we're all just going to have to hope they stay healthy and we don't end up with a shortage of the only people trained and authorized to handle human remains."

**Baker resists calls from lawmakers, undertakers to lift funeral workers to top of vaccination list**

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