



November 23, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20201

Re: Distribution of the COVID-19 Vaccine to Employees of Essential Businesses

Dear Secretary Azar,

Our national associations,¹ representing the convenience and fuel retailing industry, appreciate your efforts to devise and implement a distribution framework by which a COVID-19 vaccine is distributed in a fair and impactful manner. Our industry is not alone in looking forward to the day when Americans can access a vaccine and eventually return to life as it was before COVID-19.

We commend the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for creating a playbook to guide state and local public health programs as they plan vaccination responses to the pandemic.² Consistent with the CDC's recommendations, we believe that an effective scheme for vaccine distribution requires appropriately prioritizing employees of essential businesses. The playbook advises that essential workers of businesses that are part of the critical infrastructure workforce should receive a vaccine as part of Phase 1-B of a jurisdiction's distribution scheme. Phase 1-B would follow behind only those healthcare personnel who are grouped into Phase 1-A.

¹ NACS is an international trade association representing the convenience store industry with more than 2,200 retail and 1,600 supplier companies as members, the majority of whom are based in the United States. NATSO currently represents more than 4,000 travel plazas and truck stops nationwide, comprised of both national chains and small, independent locations. EMA member associations represent wholesalers and retailers of gasoline, diesel, heating oil, lubricants and renewable fuels. Additionally, these companies supply motor fuels to 40,000 independently owned retail outlets. SIGMA represents a diverse membership of approximately 260 independent chain retailers and marketers of motor fuel.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *COVID-19 Vaccination Program Interim Playbook for Jurisdiction Operations – Version 2.0*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Oct. 29, 2020), https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/imz-managers/downloads/COVID-19-Vaccination-Program-Interim_Playbook.pdf.

The frontline workers in our industry should receive the vaccine as part of the priority Phase 1-B. Employees in our industry serve on the front lines of the fuel and food distribution systems across the country. This includes consumer-facing retail sales of food and motor fuels as well as distribution of many of these critical products. We think this is an appropriate classification for our industry’s employees given their necessity to the day-to-day lives of Americans in all walks of life – including first responders. Without our industry getting motor fuels to market, for example, front-line workers throughout all industries would be unable to get to work – halting the economy and preventing first responders from getting to those in need. When vaccine distribution begins, trucks delivering the vaccine will depend on our retailers to be open to refuel. The food and convenience items our industry provides are also critical as our industry often has the most convenient locations and allows for quick shopping trips for American consumers. This is also helpful for first responders, especially because stores in our industry are typically the only ones open extended hours (or 24 hours per day) to serve their needs.

We also recognize the partnership between the CDC, the National Institutes of Health, and the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in determining critical populations for COVID-19 vaccination. The National Academies issued a report in October recommending that frontline workers of essential businesses should receive second-highest priority in vaccine distribution.³ It notes that the workforce in our industry are people “whose work is vital to the functioning of society and the economy,” and who also face a substantially higher risk of exposure to the virus.

We agree with the CDC that the methods by which a vaccine will be distributed in different states and localities remain unclear. Regardless of these complexities, however, we strongly urge the Department of Health and Human Services to ensure that federal priorities are followed throughout the vaccine distribution chain. That consistency is critical to protecting the American public and ensuring the most efficient return to our pre-COVID economy.

The Department of Homeland Security’s Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency recognized early on the importance of our industry to ensure Americans had food in markets, fuel at gas stations, and safe places for truck drivers to stop as they haul essential items across the country. In the deployment of a vaccine to protect Americans from COVID-19, that recognition should be applied to these critical workers.

Our employees have put themselves at risk since the beginning of the pandemic, working despite health concerns, and we believe they should be prioritized in vaccine deployment. We appreciate your consideration of our comments and sincerely thank you for the hard work you have done to protect the health of our country.

Sincerely,

National Association of Convenience Stores

³ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Framework for equitable allocation of COVID-19 vaccine*, Washington, DC: The National Academies Press (Oct. 2, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.17226/25917>.

National Association of Truckstop Operators
Energy Marketers of America
Society of Independent Gasoline Marketers of America

cc: Robert R. Redfield, MD, Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention