

BONNIE CULLISON
Legislative District 19
Montgomery County

Health and Government
Operations Committee



The Maryland House of Delegates
6 Bladen Street, Room 312
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
410-841-3883 · 301-858-3883
800-492-7122 Ext. 3883
Fax 410-841-3882 · 301-858-3882
Bonnie.Cullison@house.state.md.us

Chair, Insurance and Pharmaceuticals
Subcommittee

THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of HB 1033
Office of Health Care Quality – Influenza Virus Immunization, Education and Information
– Assisted Living Facilities

Good afternoon, Chairman Pendergrass, Vice Chairman Peña-Melnyk and honorable members of the committee. Thank you for this opportunity to present HB 1033, **Office of Health Care Quality – Influenza Virus Immunization, Education and Information – Assisted Living Facilities**. This bill seeks to help protect our elderly and disabled adults in assisted living facilities by ensuring that they have the resources necessary to make informed health care decisions and know how to access help. With this bill we are actually building on current law which requires these facilities to provide simple education about flu shots.

The requirements in the bill are direct and easy to implement with current processes. It requires the Office of Health Care Quality to double check that assisted living facilities are compliant by notifying their residents that a flu vaccine is available. It's not an extra burden for the facilities that are already doing so, and it's a good way to make sure those that aren't notifying their residents about the risks of the flu start doing it.

Meeting this requirement is a simple step. The CDC has some easy to print (or order) posters that can be put up – or, Assisted Living Facilities can work out the best education method that works for them.

Nationally, Americans, including 40% of Black and Hispanic people, are undecided about a flu vaccination. In Maryland, just over half of us get their annual flu shot, and that 57% vaccination rate actually puts us in the top 10 of all states for flu vaccines. The bottom line is that not nearly enough people are getting their flu shot.

The CDC estimates about 4.4 million cases of flu were prevented last year through vaccination, which is recommended for everyone age 6 months and older. The flu kills 12,000 to 60,000 people each year and hundreds of thousands are typically hospitalized.

As we have learned with COVID, health disparities are clearly demonstrated in rates of vaccination and deaths due to the flu. Last season, the CDC reported that Hispanic people had

the lowest vaccination rate at about 38%, followed by Black people with a rate just over 40%, in comparison to White people at 53%. Black and Hispanic people also have had higher flu hospitalizations over the past decade.

This bill focuses on assisted living facilities for two reasons. First, people 65 years and older are at high risk of developing serious complications from the flu, compared with young, healthy adults. This risk is due in part to changes in immune defenses with increasing age. While flu seasons vary in severity during most seasons, people 65 years and older bear the greatest burden of severe flu disease. In recent years, it's estimated that between 70 percent and 85 percent of seasonal flu-related deaths in the United States occur among people 65 years and older, and between about 50 percent and 70 percent of seasonal flu-related hospitalizations have occurred among people in this age group – these numbers are directly from the CDC.

Long-term medical conditions can also put you at high risk of serious flu complications. The flu can make long-term health problems worse, even if they are well managed. Diabetes, asthma, and chronic heart disease (even if well managed) are among the most common long-term medical conditions that place people at high risk of developing serious flu complications. It is particularly important that all adults with these or other chronic medical conditions get a flu shot every year.

Second, we know gaps exist at assisted living facilities. Seniors are at especially high risk for severe illness and death related to the flu, and those in long term care facilities are at high risk for severe respiratory illnesses due to the flu. In recent flu seasons, 80-90% of those who died from the flu were 65 years or older. The Maryland Department of Health has done a great job over the years to increase flu vaccinations for health care workers. Maryland hospitals lead the pack with 97% of their employees receiving the flu shot. Nursing homes aren't too far behind at 88%. However, assisted living facilities come in at 57% per year. Now, this bill doesn't extend to employees, but it's worth noting this discrepancy as an indicator. If employees aren't being notified about vaccinations, it may be that also applies to residents.

Flu shots really do work—they have proven to prevent or lessen the severity of symptoms if you do get the flu. This year, the CDC authorized a high-dose flu shot aimed at better protecting people 65 and older that guards against four strains of the virus, rather than three. Because the conventional flu vaccine can be less successful in older people, an enhanced shot to boost their immune system has been offered in recent years and this one is stronger than ever.

The primary goal of vaccination is the prevention of serious infections, complications, hospitalizations, and deaths; this is especially important among high risk groups such as the elderly. Getting vaccinated against the flu is the best way to safeguard yourself and your loved ones from the harmful effects of the flu.

Unfortunately, we have seen a parallel tragedy play out over the past year as the Covid-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted seniors. And, as we all work together on rolling out the COVID vaccine and building public awareness and education about that vaccine across the state, this is the right time to revisit similar public health protections for a vulnerable population and make sure that by the 2021-2022 flu season, Maryland's seniors who live in an assisted living facility are reminded to take an important preventative step and stay healthy.

Thank you very much for your consideration of this bill. On behalf of some of our most vulnerable Marylanders, I respectfully request a favorable report for HB 1033.

Resources: <https://www.baltimoresun.com/coronavirus/bs-hs-flu-vaccine-in-demand-in-maryland-20201009-tergqyojtzc3dkbumt46zyvrja-story.html>
<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pdf/freeresources/seniors/seniors-vaccination-factsheet-final.pdf>
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/20/health/coronavirus-flu-vaccine.html>
https://mhcc.maryland.gov/mhcc/pages/apcd/apcd_quality/apcd_quality_hcw_inluenza_vaccinati_on.aspx