



December 22, 2020

Commissioner Jan Malcolm  
Minnesota Department of Health  
625 Robert Street N., Saint Paul, MN 55101

Dear Commissioner Malcolm,

Earlier this month, MPHA contacted you to highlight the disparate effect of COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths on residents of public housing highrises in Minnesota, and the wisdom of using these highrise communities as one early focus of the COVID-19 vaccine. We thank you for your consideration of our input, which appears to be in line with further priorities since released by the US Centers for Disease Control.

The CDC's latest guidance on vaccination covers multiple categories of essential workers who should be further prioritized before the vaccine becomes widely available to all. **MPHA and Volunteers of America are writing you together today to raise awareness of our on-site staff on the front lines of the coronavirus battle.**

Since the pandemic began, the social workers of VOA and the maintenance and property staff of MPHA have never left their posts. They have adapted to take the best precautions possible, knowing that without their daily on-site presence, we would fail in our mission to protect the homes and wellbeing of thousands of vulnerable, low-income people. MPHA staff perform the extensive cleaning that protects our spaces, enter confined units for a maintenance emergency and confront unauthorized visitors who might bring the virus into the building. VOA social workers are the front-line when a resident has a mental health crisis, struggles with expenses or household needs, or needs help with vital information or resources in their native language. VOA social workers also remain essential to helping medical teams execute on-site COVID-19 testing at MPHA buildings; they will presumably play a similar role in any vaccination clinics.

All of this work continues notwithstanding the circumstances detailed in MPHA's prior letter: the close conditions of high-rise living, together with the high percentage of elderly and disabled residents, leave those communities particularly susceptible to COVID-19.

The CDC's new guidance categorizes the US economy's essential workers as "front-line" and "other" (1B and 1C, respectively). The guidance appears to leave some discretion around the workers we are discussing here. While these VOA and MPHA staff are clearly among the "Housing and Shelter" category under 1C, we believe their unique daily work with a highly vulnerable population argues for close consideration of whether they are "front-line" to a similar extent as teachers, grocery workers, and other explicit categories under 1B. Vaccinating them earlier in the process also lowers the danger to the high-risk public housing resident community.

Thank you for incorporating this further input into a complex decision-making process around the COVID-19 vaccine. We remain grateful for the ongoing work of your team in protecting all Minnesotans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Abdi Warsame".

Abdi Warsame  
Executive Director/CEO  
Minneapolis Public Housing Authority

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Julie Manworren".

Julie Manworren  
President/CEO  
Volunteers of America of Minnesota and Wisconsin

Copy:

*Office of Governor Tim Walz and Lt. Governor Peggy Flanagan*

*Minnesota Housing Commissioner Jennifer Ho*

*Minnesota Housing Deputy Commissioner Rachel Robinson*

*Kris Ehresmann, Director MDH IDEPC Division*

*MPHA Board of Commissioners and Executive Staff*

*Bill Melton and Rhonda Peterson, VOA Co-Directors of Highrise Social Services*