

## ARC THRIFT STORES

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VFINAL

### **Vaccinating People in Colorado with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Should be a Priority**

**Op-Ed by LLOYD LEWIS, president and CEO of arc Thrift Stores**

We all can agree that 2020 was perhaps one of the most difficult years any of us have ever experienced. As we settle into this new year, I am focused on remaining optimistic and positive about the changes I hope to come.

But I am also worried. I am the president and CEO of one of the state's largest employers of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). I am also the father of a 17-year-old young man with Down syndrome. What troubles me and keeps me up at night is that this vulnerable population -- my son, my employees and friends, and the thousands of people in Colorado who have IDD -- is not being adequately protected. I implore Gov. Polis to make this population a higher priority on the vaccination list.

As the COVID vaccine is rolled out across the state, it is not lost on me or my colleagues who work every day to champion for the rights of people with IDD, that this population is not being prioritized. For nearly two decades I have been working for community inclusion, and never have I been more concerned.

Some sobering statistics to consider:

- According to the [FAIR Health survey](#), people with intellectual and developmental disabilities under the age of 70 were 4 to 5 times more likely to die following COVID-19 infection than the general population. The only people at higher risk were people with lung cancer.
- The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has now identified [people with Down syndrome as being at high risk](#) of severe illness following COVID-19 infection.
- People with IDD and/or other disabilities have support personnel coming in and out of their homes, placing them at higher risk for infection.
- People with IDD and other disabilities may experience multiple medical conditions that result in a higher risk for severe illness and death from COVID-19 infection.

And, perhaps most significantly,

- According to year-end figures, there were over [1.3 million Coloradans](#) ahead of people with IDD to receive the vaccine (except for those people with IDD currently living in long-term care facilities, nursing homes, assisted living facilities, intermediate care facilities, and group homes).

In other words, the hard truth is that in Colorado many people with IDD will become eligible for the COVID vaccine only AFTER healthy adults and people who work in offices or even remote settings.

Of course, COVID has upended all of our lives -- the virus does not discriminate. Our government shouldn't either.

People in Colorado with intellectual and developmental disabilities are valuable, essential members of our state and our economy. But because of certain pre-existing conditions, it is often difficult for them to social distance themselves, get around with cars, use drive-through services, or take public transportation. They are therefore, at a higher risk for serious complications if they contract COVID. I cannot sit idly by while the disability community is overlooked.

It's a simple as this: we are asking that people with IDD be immediately prioritized within Phase 1B of Colorado's COVID-19 vaccine distribution plan and that they should be able to obtain the vaccine from their provider or pharmacy when available just as everyone else.

Since the pandemic hit in March of last year, Arc Thrift Stores has stepped in where and when we were needed. As a designated Essential Business, in the last 10 months we have provided over 65 tons of food to people in need, thousands and thousands of pounds of masks and material for masks, PPE, scrubs, and supplies for thousands of Coloradoans and to hundreds of organizations (such as rescue missions, Meals on Wheels, food pantries, homeless shelters, senior centers, Native American reservations, childcare centers, etc.) who are also helping in this time of need.

But more can be done.

My son, and our employees with IDD, and all Coloradoans with IDD, are my heart and soul. I ask that Colorado prioritize people with IDD for vaccines. Any further loss of life for any of these wonderful souls would cut at me, and Colorado, deeply.

Even a single loss of life, preventable with vaccination, is one life too many.

I urge you to contact the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor, and your state representative and senator to help advocate for this important part of our community. Here are the email addresses for our Governor, [governorpolis@state.co.us](mailto:governorpolis@state.co.us) and our Lieutenant Governor, [Dianne.Primavera@state.co.us](mailto:Dianne.Primavera@state.co.us) [This link](#) has been recently updated to provide your Colorado senators and representatives based on your home address (input your address in the field at the top left of the interactive map). Typically you will find their photo, email address, and website at this site.

You can visit [www.arcthrift.com/priorities](http://www.arcthrift.com/priorities) to learn more about ways you can help.