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The Absurdity of the Vaccination Distribution Plan

A small group of unelected doctors, lawyers, and public health policy experts have been meeting to decide who in Wisconsin gets priority for the COVID-19 vaccine. The committee members of the Wisconsin State Disaster Medical Advisory Committee (SDMAC) Vaccine Distribution Subcommittee have been deliberating the vaccine priority group 1B, which will follow group 1A: frontline health workers and nursing homes. What's concerning to me and many of my constituents is that the subcommittee recommended that incarcerated individuals should be next in line for their vaccinations. [This choice](#) means the Evers administration would prioritize prisoners, 68% of whom committed violent crimes, to be vaccinated likely before their victims.

Wisconsin has over 20,000 incarcerated individuals currently in the custody of the Department of Corrections (DOC). [According to DOC's own website](#), the average age for male prisoners is 39 years old and the average age for female prisoners is 37 years old. It is also important to note that the guidance from the Centers for Disease Control recommends those under age 64 should be in priority group 2. [Wisconsin's own DHS has the statistics for the hardest hit age groups in our state – basically those aged 60 or above account for 92% of our state's deaths, add those aged 50-59 and that represents 97% of deaths](#). One death is too many, but for those under the age of 50 it is less than 3% of all of our state's deaths due to COVID-19.

On January 22, 2021, SDMAC's Vaccine Distribution Subcommittee held a public meeting to discuss their preliminary recommendations to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) for the COVID-19 vaccine priority group 1B; essentially deciding the next folks who could obtain the vaccine. This meeting was held after the public comment period ended on January 20th regarding the subcommittee's initial recommendations. I appreciate the subcommittee's work, however, the subcommittee's recommendation to vaccinate incarcerated individuals (i.e. prisoners) in priority group 1B is literally jeopardizing people's lives.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practice (ACIP) came out with vaccine recommendations for priority groups 1A, 1B, 1C, and group 2. [ACIP recommended prison staff](#) to be included in priority group 1B, but never mentioned incarcerated individuals. Furthermore, Wisconsin's subcommittee received over 150 public comments stating that people over the age of 65, regardless of health risk factors, should be prioritized over incarcerated individuals. Another 82 public comments stating the opposition to the inclusion of incarcerated individuals in group 1B. [Even the subcommittee's draft report, page eight, stated: "100/100 comments were opposed to the recommendation \(of including prisoners in priority group 1B\)." If the subcommittee received such overwhelming disapproval of this particular recommendation, then why have they made this precise decision?](#)

Right now there is a limitation on the supply of the vaccine – we hear that on the news each night. But, the Vaccine Distribution Subcommittee [cites the Eighth Amendment as rationale for including the addition of incarcerated individuals in priority group 1B](#). I agree, incarcerated individuals do have a constitutional right to health care - the vast majority of public comments never said *not* to provide vaccines to the prison population. The major concern is not if incarcerated individuals should be vaccinated, it is the priority group they should be placed in.

With a limited supply of the vaccine, and a less than stellar vaccine distribution plan, we need to take care of our most vulnerable population first and, in my humble opinion, it is those essential workers and those above the age of 60. These are mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, and grandparents, and getting that vaccine in a timely manner ahead of someone younger and at less risk could mean the difference of life or death.