



ACLU of Utah Request for Universal COVID-19 Vaccine Access in Utah Jails and Prisons

April 27, 2021 | As Utah continues its efforts to defend against COVID-19, including to vaccinate as many people against it as possible, state and local governments must commit to focused efforts within historically underserved and vulnerable populations. It is especially critical that vaccination efforts include individuals being held in county jails and state prisons. For numerous reasons, state and county officials must provide access to the COVID-19 vaccine to every incarcerated person in the state.

First, Utahns held in jails and prisons are completely reliant on the government to receive access to any healthcare, including COVID-19 vaccines. Government officials, therefore, have a constitutional as well as a moral duty to care for everyone in their custody and keep them safe.

Moreover, incarcerated individuals face a disproportionate risk of contracting COVID-19. In Utah, individuals in prison were infected with COVID-19 at a rate 4.5 times higher than the general population. County jails in Utah face similar elevated rates of infection, driven by congregate living and the inability to practice safe social distancing. Experience shows that outbreaks in jails do not stay in jails. When an incarcerated person is infected with COVID-19, it elevates the risk that staff, volunteers, and others may contract it and spread it into the local community. Preventing outbreaks in jails and prisons is not only a question of protecting incarcerated individuals' health and safety; it also has a positive impact on the entire surrounding community.

While some county officials and local health departments have shown a commitment to safeguarding the health of incarcerated people by distributing vaccines in county jails, other counties have fallen short. The result is inconsistent vaccine access. Thus, the health and safety of incarcerated individuals is largely determined by the initiative of county officials and local health departments. This is also true for hundreds of individuals incarcerated by the Department of Corrections who are housed in county jails across the state.

Incarcerated people must not face vastly different health outcomes and risks based on the county where they are incarcerated. Robust vaccination efforts require cooperation from various officials and entities, but county and local health departments are the first resource.

ACLU of Utah Request for Action

We request that all local health departments not already offering COVID-19 vaccines to all incarcerated people within their jurisdiction make plans to ensure universal vaccine access by May 4, 2021.

We also urge all health departments to inform the public of those plans by the same date. For those departments who do not form and announce plans by then, we will determine if other action may be needed. We know that the health and safety of everyone in Utah is a common goal for all of us, and we will continue to work toward it.