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Colorado universities want their employees who interact with students to get vaccinated sooner

State officials, who once lumped all educators into a vaccine category higher than the general public, have since decided college professors will get the vaccine at the same time as the general public.



Andy Cross, The Denver Post

COVID-19 vaccines await injection at the UHealth COVID-19 mass vaccination clinic in the Coors Field parking lot Jan. 30, 2021. UHealth partnered with the Governor's office, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment and the Colorado Rockies to administer the vaccine over two days to 10,000 people, 70-years and older who pre-registered.

By **ELIZABETH HERNANDEZ** | ehernandez@denverpost.com | The Denver Post



University staff and faculty who already are or soon will be teaching college students in person are confused and concerned about their recent bump down on Colorado's COVID-19 vaccine prioritization chart.

State officials, who once lumped all educators into a vaccine category higher than the general public, have since decided college professors will get the vaccine at the same time as the general public.

"Everybody will be able to get the vaccine, and everyone is equally deserving," said Conor Cahill, spokesman for the governor's office, when asked about higher education employee's spot on the vaccine distribution list. "This is just a question of when, and we have to define each group in a way so that it is not too broad and not too narrow."

"Governor Polis is focused on making sure that every child who wants the opportunity to learn in-person is able to, as high-quality remote learning is significantly more difficult for younger students," Cahill wrote in an email to The Denver Post. "In-person learning for P-12 also has the added benefit of helping parents get back to work, and it's been an especially difficult time for single-parent households. The Governor has heard from many professionals including college professors with young kids at home that they too are facing challenges working and want their kids back at school."

Megan McDermott, spokeswoman for the Colorado Department of Higher Education, said the agency is in "constant contact" with the state health department to determine how to best protect the higher education system while vaccine supplies are limited.

Gov. Jared Polis announced Friday "student-facing" staff in preschool through 12th-grade, child care workers and people between the ages of 65 and 69 would be eligible for the vaccine starting Feb. 8, three categories ahead of the general public.

When asked Tuesday where college educators fell in the vaccine chart, Polis said it was much easier for a 20-year-old to learn remotely than a 7-year-old.



"Does he not know we're returning to in-person learning and that some colleges already have?" said Kimberly Killen, a 32-year-old PhD candidate at the University of Colorado Boulder who will be a teaching assistant for two in-person courses, beginning Feb.15.

Killen said she was confused by the governor's statements Tuesday because student-facing college faculty and staff were [previously told](#) they would be in a higher vaccine prioritization than the general public.

"It's really concerning for me considering the new COVID-19 variant and students coming from all over the country," Killen said.

Killen also noted the [surge of novel coronavirus cases among college-aged individuals](#) in Boulder County in the fall when CU Boulder was home to the [largest COVID-19 outbreak in Colorado](#). The university claimed virus transmission was not happening in the classroom but stemmed from [students partying and socializing outside of their households](#).

Ken McConnellogue, spokesman for the University of Colorado, said the university system is advocating for student-facing faculty and staff to be placed in the 1B vaccine category along with their K-12 colleagues. CU Regent Glen Gallegos agreed.

Sarah Watamura, who leads the University of Denver's COVID response efforts, said she understands there are a lot of factors going into who receives the vaccine and when. The university resumed in-person learning in January.

"We're hopeful there will be another designation down the road for higher ed before the general population," Watamura said.



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Elizabeth Hernandez started at The Denver Post as an intern in 2014 and just kept coming to work until they hired her in 2015. Hernandez covers higher education and issues impacting younger readers -- affordable housing, student loan debt, social media and more -- from teens to millennials.

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