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## For rabbis, America's complex COVID-19 vaccine rollout means eligibility can come down to guesswork

BY HANNAH DREYFUS    JANUARY 29, 2021



A set of COVID-19 vaccination record cards from the CDC. (Ben Hasty/MediaNews Group/Reading Eagle via Getty Images)

(JTA) — The email offered what felt like a lifeline to the dozens of rabbis in the Chicago area who received it last week. “Vaccines are now available for clergy,” an official with the Chicago Board of Rabbis wrote, passing along a link to sign up for a COVID-19 vaccine.

Days later, some of those rabbis were rolling up their sleeves to get the shot that would start to make their pre-pandemic lives possible once again. Lizzi Heydemann, rabbi and founder of Mishkan, a nondenominational congregation in Chicago, marked her vaccination with a public Facebook post accompanied by a translation of the Shehecheyanu prayer: “That we lived and stood up and reached this time.”

But Heydemann, who is 40, hadn't actually been clearly eligible for the vaccine under Illinois' current guidelines. The rules permit clergy who work in health care settings to get the shot, but not others.

Rabbi Reni Dickman, the Chicago Board of Rabbis executive vice president who sent the email, realized she might have misunderstood the guidelines, which appear in different forms in different places online, after she got a flurry of confused replies.

"I thought rabbis were included in [phase] 1A but then I realized, no, most of us are not," she said, saying that she clarified to those who had reached out to her that only rabbis who fit the description of a "frontline healthcare worker" were eligible for the vaccine. But she said, "Rabbis have called me saying that they heard otherwise." Others, like Heydemann, were able to sign up and complete their vaccine appointments without a hitch.

The saga points to a challenging dynamic in America's vaccine rollout: Confusing guidance and a patchwork of rules and providers mean that rabbis are left to figure out where they fit in, and the answers can vary depending on the day, state and interpretation of local rules.

Underlying the tumult is a more ideological debate about whether clergy should be considered frontline workers, regardless of where the majority of their pastoral duties are carried out.

"Clergy work in a variety of frontline caregiving settings that don't include healthcare or schools," said Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, chief executive of the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogues of Conservative Judaism, associations for Conservative rabbis and synagogues.. The responsibility to perform lifecycle events — including funerals — should make vaccinating a clergy "a priority," he said.

Heydemann said she had performed funerals during the pandemic and noted that the vaccination would allow her to facilitate bar and bat mitzvahs in person, rather than by Zoom. "It's been heartbreaking not to be in the same room with families for these milestones," she said.



COVID-19 vaccine vials stored at -80 degrees Celsius in the pharmacy at Roseland Community Hospital in Chicago, Dec. 18, 2020. (Scott Olson/Getty Images)

Rabbi Mark Dratch, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Council of America, a large network of Orthodox rabbis, said he sees both attending synagogues and the pastoral support of clergy as essential services. Some Orthodox rabbis involved in preparing bodies for burial were able to register for the vaccine under the category of funeral directors, he said.

“Clergy provide spiritual and emotional support for members of communities — in that way, they’re frontline workers,” he said. “Physical health is most important, but a feeling of connectedness is important for someone’s psychological stability.”

The guidelines in New York, which at this point do not extend eligibility to clergy who are not healthcare workers or educators, have been “frustrating” to local rabbis who feel they “can’t fully perform their pastoral duties,” said Dratch. “All that being said, we are committed to following the rules established by each jurisdiction.”

Nonetheless, certain New York pulpit rabbis have been able to receive the vaccine. Rabbi Joshua Stanton, the rabbi of East End Temple on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, said he called “several people in the

New York State system to make sure he was really eligible” before signing up and receiving his first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine earlier this month. New York is administering the vaccine to educators and, aside from his pulpit responsibilities, Stanton teaches several times a week at his synagogue’s Hebrew school, which offered an in-person option for families.

“I don’t want to be jumping the line,” said Stanton, who is 34. “The state has a plan in place for who should get vaccinated when, and I didn’t want to get in under any exception.” Once he discovered that teachers and education professionals who instruct in a range of settings were eligible, he took his shot. “We made sure it was kosher and we moved ahead.”

Though he declined to provide names, Stanton said he knows of several New York colleagues who did receive the vaccine despite not being chaplains or teachers. The discovery left him “very surprised.”

“These are highly reputable folks — they’re not known for trying to find shortcuts in the system,” he said. “I’m sure they had a good reason to move ahead.” Different people have different approaches, he added. “I guess it’s correct in a technical sense that all clergy are frontline workers in some capacity.”

The question of eligibility is not only circulating among Jewish clergy — in Chicago, a group of Christian ministers publicly received the vaccine at Rush University Medical Center this week in order to reduce hesitancy among communities of color most affected by the virus.

Neither the Rush University Medical Center nor the Illinois Department of Public Health returned requests for comment about how clergy members were able to qualify for the vaccine under the current state guidelines.

Vaccinating clergy in order to encourage more widespread acceptance of the vaccine is a tactic other states are also implementing, even if those clergy wouldn’t otherwise qualify for the initial phase of distribution. Rabbi Micah Peltz, senior rabbi of Temple Beth Shalom in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, received his first dose of the COVID-19

vaccine over two weeks ago after the Virtua Health System, a major hospital system in southern New Jersey, specifically reached out to local clergy to offer vaccinations.



Members of the Illinois National Guard vaccinate residents against COVID-19 at a mass vaccination center set up at the Tinley Park Convention Center in Tinley Park, Ill., Jan. 26, 2021. (Scott Olson/Getty Images)

Peltz, who authored the Conservative movement’s statement on the ethics of vaccine distribution, was “very sensitive to not jumping the line.” In the statement, he concludes that it is forbidden by Jewish law to use personal connections or financial means to get the vaccine before others.

But after confirming that the invitation from the local health system was legitimate, Peltz, 42, took the opportunity. “The hospital wanted to send a strong message to the public about the importance of getting the vaccine. I wasn’t going to say no,” he said.

In Israel, too, public health officials tapped leading rabbis to be vaccinated early and publicly as a strategy for getting their followers to take the vaccine as well. But weeks before Peltz was vaccinated, two

Orthodox rabbis faced criticism in New York City after they were among the first people vaccinated there.

Rabbis Hershel Schachter and Mordechai Willig got their vaccines from ParCare, a network of clinics that is under investigation for distributing vaccines outside of the state's prescribed rules. Schachter, who is 70 and became eligible shortly after receiving the vaccine because of his age, said in December that he would not have taken the shot had he known it was illicit.

Peltz said the situation had gotten "more complicated" since he first penned his opinion. Among his congregants, he has witnessed a lot of confusion about how and when to register and why certain people are receiving the vaccination before others. "I would revise it to simply say once one's cohort is up, you should go get your vaccination," he said.

Rabbi Avi Anderson, 33, rabbi of the Orthodox Young Israel Aish of Las Vegas, said that though Nevada's guidelines for distribution were unclear, he took initiative to ask if clergy were eligible and received a yes from state authorities.

"I presented a letter that I'm clergy and that my job includes teaching and leading people at in-person services," said Anderson. "They accepted it. The process was actually very simple."

After his own experience, Anderson was inspired to help other local rabbis get vaccinated as well. He stopped short of posting his vaccination picture on Facebook. "Maybe soon," he said.