

March 15, 2021

Virtual Hearing on COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout
Illinois Senate Health Committee

RE: Howard Brown Health Vaccine Rollout Testimony

Chair Morrison, Vice-Chair Joyce, and Members of the Senate Health Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to share about our experiences, successes, and challenges in administering the COVID-19 vaccine. Howard Brown Health is the largest LGBTQ health center in the Midwest United States, serving over 38,000 patients across twelve clinic locations throughout Chicago. As a federally qualified health center (FQHC), Howard Brown provides comprehensive, affirming, and affordable care to all of our patients, regardless of ability to pay.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Howard Brown has been a leader in Chicago's response to the public health crisis, especially among underserved communities hit hardest by the pandemic. From March through December 2020, Howard Brown performed over 64,000 COVID tests, representing 2.6% of all tests administered across the city of Chicago. In keeping with our mission to ensure the health and well-being of LGBTQ people and other historically marginalized communities, we provided COVID testing at eight community care stations across the city—including mobile care stations across the south and west sides of Chicago—in order to provide accessible and affordable care to the communities hit hardest by the pandemic. We drew on our expertise in infectious disease epidemiology and crisis HIV response to quickly pivot to providing COVID contact tracing services, as well as critical social services and support to keep our patients safe and healthy throughout the pandemic.

It is our goal to reach as many people with COVID vaccines as we were able to reach with our testing and support efforts, especially among the communities most impacted by the pandemic. We have increased our workforce, implemented new COVID-safe workflows, and developed and expanded our community partnerships so that we are prepared to be a leader in Chicago's vaccination efforts. As a FQHC, we have been on the frontlines providing care and support services to low-income and uninsured people throughout the pandemic, and as such, we and our FQHC partners throughout the state are well-positioned to engage communities that are hardest hit by the pandemic in vaccine rollout. Beyond COVID-19 testing, treatment and vaccination, as an FQHC that offers comprehensive services, we are also able to help our patients address other health concerns and connect them to vital support services to ensure that they stay safe and healthy as we continue to fight the pandemic.

Howard Brown has already had some great successes in our initial vaccination efforts. We use a variety of outreach strategies to ensure that patients and community members, especially those that are most vulnerable to COVID-19, are able to easily schedule vaccinations through Howard Brown. For example, we use targeted calls to schedule vaccination appointments for established and eligible Howard Brown patients; a public online scheduling system for eligible community members; and we partner with churches, City Council members, and community groups specifically to reach people in areas of high need on the south and west sides of Chicago. Using targeted and community-based outreach strategies is essential for reaching communities that may not have the resources or capacity to access our online scheduling platform.

We are committed to ensuring that our vaccination efforts are rooted in health equity. In order to increase access to the vaccine in the most disproportionately impacted neighborhoods, we've hosted a series of community mass vaccination events. With assistance from our community partners, we were able to provide free vaccinations at various locations—including community organizations, churches, and museums—throughout the north, west, and south sides of Chicago on February 13th and February 27th. This ensures that people living in under-resourced communities are able to access vaccines right in their own neighborhoods, eliminating transportation barriers. We also worked with our community partners to disseminate information and resources about the vaccine to combat vaccine hesitancy. These mass vaccination events have so far been a great success! At the first two events, we were able to vaccinate nearly 4000 community members—the vast majority of whom were people of color—across the north, west, and south sides of Chicago. These events have generated a lot of community excitement and engagement with our vaccination efforts, and we plan to continue offering these community vaccination events, dependent on our vaccine supply. In combination with the vaccinations we've been administering to patients at our clinical sites, we've given out over 10,000 vaccinations to Chicago residents and Howard Brown patients.

The greatest challenge that we've encountered so far in our vaccination efforts has been the unreliable and unpredictable vaccine supply allocation. The current weekly request/supply cycle results in great variability of vaccine supply from week to week. This uncertainty around our vaccine supply makes it very difficult to plan adequately for our vaccination events and our vaccine appointment scheduling. It has sometimes resulted in wasted effort scheduling and rescheduling vaccine appointments, and has also caused some anxiety for our patients around guaranteeing the second vaccine dose when it is due. FQHCs need the ability to plan long term. While we've been successful in mounting our mass vaccination events, we've had to organize them with scarcely a week's notice because of the varying weekly allocation of vaccine supply. FQHCs like Howard Brown are already out on the frontlines playing a critical role in vaccine distribution for underserved communities, but in



order to ensure long-term success in our vaccination efforts, we need a reliable minimum weekly vaccine supply that we can count on.

Thank you for the opportunity to share about Howard Brown's experience with COVID-19 vaccine administration. We look forward to working closely with you in our continued efforts to care for and serve all Illinoisans throughout this public health crisis.

Sincerely,

Ken Griffin, Chief Operating Officer
Howard Brown Health

David Ernesto Munar, President and CEO
Howard Brown Health

Tim Wang, Director of Policy and Advocacy
Howard Brown Health