

Louisiana Independent Pharmacies Association

What's New and What to Watch

LIPA Newsletter:

Bringing you the latest news and information concerning independent pharmacies and the profession at-large....



Members

COVID Vaccines for (Almost) Everybody

Effective Monday, the added administrative burden and paperwork for vaccine providers verifying eligibility to get the COVID vaccine now is being removed. Louisiana will become the ninth state in which anyone age 16 and older is eligible to get the vaccine. Providers will no longer need to inquire about a person's underlying health conditions or field of employment! This will eliminate the amount of time it has taken for you to explain to people why they cannot get the vaccine now. LHD has said any attestation forms previously signed by patients still need to be maintained in a HIPAA-compliant manner for six months (until approximately October 1st), at which point they can be destroyed.

Yesterday, the White House upped their goal for the number of vaccines administered during the first hundred days of the Biden administration from 100 million doses (already achieved) to 200 million doses. It does not sound like this is a "stretch goal" as CNBC [reports](#) that *"if that vaccination rate is maintained (an average of 2.5 million doses per day), Biden's 200-million-dose target would be hit in about five weeks, or around April 23 — a full week before Biden would mark 100 days in the White House."*

Rethinking Pfizer Vaccine

Are you reluctant to request the Pfizer vaccine? While you may not have been looking, the draconian storage requirements for the Pfizer vaccine have been eased. Pfizer vaccine can now be received frozen and stored in a regular freezer for 13 days plus another 120 hours (5 days) in the refrigerator for a total of 17 days. One consideration to think about is that **only** the Pfizer vaccine is approved for administration to 16- and 17-year-olds. One potential partner to think about partnering with for onsite vaccines is high schools in your community or neighborhood for their older students.

Update on Continuing Vaccines Onsite at Nursing Homes

This week, LIPA has worked to match 154 of Louisiana's licensed skilled nursing facilities with their preferred partner for continuing vaccines onsite now that the three-visit commitment by the federal partners CVS and Walgreens is wrapping up. For those facilities that had no preference, LIPA provided them a list of independent pharmacies that responded to our recent survey, expressing interest in providing services at their location so that they could make a selection. Several of the nursing facilities have arranged with a local hospital or clinic to provide COVID vaccine services while others will be using a chain institutional pharmacy (Pharmerica).

LIPA is in discussions with LDH regarding LIPA's role in provide ongoing administrative and logistical support to pharmacies, 154 skilled nursing facilities, and other congregate living settings, relative to onsite vaccines for residents and employees. The percentage of health workers at the 154 nursing facilities who are fully vaccinated varies widely.

Bring Back Louisiana Statewide COVID Vaccine Campaign Launched

While demand from the public to get the COVID vaccine has been high during the initial rollout, we can expect it to become **increasingly challenging** in the coming months to get the vaccine to a sufficient number of adults to achieve the hoped-for immunity. Louisiana has historically had low flu vaccination rates. We know that there are various reasons for “vaccine hesitancy” (misinformation, religious, political, etc.) and then there are the folks who don’t make a conscious decision to **not** get the vaccine as soon as they can, but it just isn’t very important or at the top of their list of “things to do today.”

LDH is [partnering](#) with 21 grassroots organizations—including LIPA-- in ***Bring Back Louisiana*** #SleevesUp to “meet people where they are” and break down barriers to the COVID vaccines. The campaign will begin in April with vaccination events in each public health region. The aim of these events is to reach communities of concern using targeted outreach strategies. LDH is now providing vaccine information on their website showing vaccine rates at both the [parish level and census tract level](#), which is going to be helpful in seeing where more work and resources are needed. Typically, tracts cover portions of parishes, cities, and towns. For privacy reasons, the Department of Health does not release data on tracts with fewer than 800 people or those where there have been fewer than six people vaccinated. Expect to hear more soon as to how you and/or your pharmacy can get involved in [Bring Back Louisiana](#) in your community or neighborhood.

The campaign’s message is “*Vaccines offer safe and effective protection from COVID-19.*” They are our best hope at ultimately ending this pandemic. It is our best chance at restoring a little normalcy, getting our economy back on track, and bringing back the Louisiana we know and love.

Where’s the Janssen (J&J) Vaccine?

A frequent question from members is “when will I be able to order J&J (Janssen) one-dose vaccine for my pharmacy?” It has been a month since it was approved, and states received an initial shipment of 3.9 million doses and no Janssen vaccine has been made available to independent pharmacy providers. A **Politico** [story](#) this week talked about the “mystery” of why more J&J vaccine has not gotten into arms and the fact that some states [we would put Louisiana on that list] have not distributed the J&J vaccine broadly but appear to be reserving it for certain populations. While J&J committed to providing a total of 20 million doses of vaccine by the end of March, **Politico**—in a different [story](#) this week—is reporting that the vaccine promised for March may not be ready for shipment until the second or third week in April due to production delays.

To get “into the weeds”, the vaccine itself is currently being manufactured in Europe and then shipped to the United States for “fill and finish” at two locations: Emergent Bio-solutions in Baltimore and Catalent in Bloomington, Indiana. Neither has been authorized yet by the FDA, though the location in Baltimore has millions of doses ready to ship to McKesson for distribution as soon as they get the necessary federal sign-off. The bottom line is that J&J vaccine is still in short supply and demand exceeds supply.

Signs of Movement on Rx Price Reform at the Federal Level

This week, Xavier Becerra was confirmed by the Senate to succeed Alex Azar as Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The position had been vacant for more than two months. We have seen a number of [stories](#) that the Democratic Congress will take up “drug pricing” as part of their infrastructure bill. In fact, Senator Bernie Sanders has scheduled a hearing for Tuesday, March 31st. This matters to independent pharmacies because DIR reform within Medicare is much more likely to be folded into a larger drug pricing bill.

Louisiana will have **two new members of Congress** (newly elected Congresswoman Julia Letlow representing the 5th Congressional District and the winner of the 2nd District runoff between Troy Carter and Karen Carter Peterson. LIPA will be reaching out to them and their Health Policy Directors—along with the rest of the Louisiana Congressional delegation—to make the case for the inclusion of DIR reform as part of any legislation package related to Medicare drug pricing.

Enrolling in Medicare Part B is Currently Free

While your pharmacy may not currently be a vaccine provider or offer other services billable to Medicare Part B if you are not currently enrolled as a Medicare Part B provider, the normal \$595 fee is currently being waived and enrollment is good for five years. Here is the link to more information on the Novitas Solutions [website](#). (Novitas Solutions is the Medicare contractor for Louisiana for provider enrollment and claims payment). If you want to bill Medicare for COVID vaccine administration, you can actually enroll temporarily by phone between 7:30 AM and 3 PM Central Time. Here is the [link](#) for more information on “immediate enrollment.”

Getting Reimbursement for COVID Vaccine Administration

Feedback from LIPA members is that most of our member pharmacies are billing payers with success and seeing minimal issues with the exception of a few of you who have experienced issues with OptumPay (claims for the uninsured). Here is a resource on COVID vaccine billing [best practices](#) for community pharmacies recommended by LIPA's billing and reimbursement subject matter expert M.J. Terrebonne. The link includes billing guides from [CPESN](#) and also [Pioneer](#) for those of you using that software.

PBM Oversight by Louisiana Board of Pharmacy Will Soon Be a Reality

By design, some actions before governments can take years to fully go into effect. A prime example of that is Acts 2019. No. 124 that you worked so diligently to pass. After passage at the Legislature, the Board of Pharmacy worked to promulgate the regulations necessitated by Act 124 by conducting hearings, publishing Notices of Intent in the Louisiana Register, and presenting the proposed regulations to the Louisiana Occupational Licensing Review Commission (OLRC) for final review. At every step of the process, PCMA and the PBMs fought the implementation of the regulations required by Act 124.

At last, during a hearing yesterday (March 25th), the Louisiana OLRC gave the Board of Pharmacy approval to proceed with the publication of the Final Rule, which will allow regulations to be enforced. We are working to ensure the regulations are enforceable upon publication, which may be as soon as the April 20, 2021 edition of the [Louisiana Register](#). We will keep you updated.

In the NEWS:

Florida small business pharmacies call for PBM regulations

[State of Reform 03/23/2021](#)

Small business pharmacies are supporting legislation that would regulate Pharmacy Benefit Managers (PBMs). Bernie Bishop, a spokesman for Small Business Pharmacies Aligned for Reform, told State of Reform that the proposed regulations would help small pharmacies survive.

Pharmacy Benefit Managers manage prescription drugs for health insurers. They often serve as the middleman between drug manufacturers and pharmacies, setting prices for drugs and calculating reimbursement.

They are largely unregulated around the country. This allows the managers to operate unrestricted, which small pharmacies say gives them unfair advantage. Currently, PBMs are allowed to distribute drugs as they please and often favor pharmacies they own for drugs that earn higher reimbursement. This shrinks the profit margins of small business pharmacies.

Pharmacist supports health care reform bill

[Hometown Source 03/25/2021](#)

COVID-19 has put a spotlight on the importance of access to quality care. As an independent pharmacist, I hear from my patients regularly what it means to have access to our services and care - right in their own backyard. During this pandemic, community pharmacies are providing meaningful health care, vaccinations, and the everyday medications that our patients need. We are an important part of the health care system, and I hope that this session, our state lawmakers and Governor Walz will stand up for community pharmacists and our patients by supporting common sense health care reform.

Many patients, especially in rural communities, are forced to use unreliable mail order services or drive many miles to out-of-town drugstores to get their medication instead of being able to get it at their hometown pharmacy. This limits community access to care for patients, because of unfair monopolies and patient steering policies put in place by pharmacy benefit managers (PBMs). Just three PBMs control more than 80 percent of the market, creating a near monopoly on the system. PBMs are making it anti-competitive for independent pharmacies to keep their doors open and drive up the cost of your prescriptions, lining their own pockets along the way.

As a pharmacist and advocate for my patients, it is hard to see so many patients struggle with rising drug costs. Our legislators have a chance to help address this issue and bring transparency to prescription drug pricing at the Capitol this year. The Pharmacy Fair Competition Act will help shine a light on PBM practices and protect our local community pharmacy care.

New Technologies Boost Pharmacist's Role

[Pharmacy Times 03/25/2021](#)

Treatment modalities are expanding beyond medications to include digital therapeutics, which are software-based therapies that help manage, prevent, and treat disease.

The first prescription digital therapeutic (DTx) was cleared by the FDA in 2017 to treat substance use disorder (SUD),¹ and the first virtual reality (VR) therapeutic received FDA breakthrough device designation in 2020 to help treat chronic pain.² Sensor-enabled medications that record and transmit data on medication use have entered the market, supporting patients in taking care of their health and providing pharmacists with actionable insights to guide medication optimization.^{3,4}

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has accelerated digital health advances. Direct-to-consumer prescription delivery services, patient monitoring, and telehealth have been instrumental in maintaining essential services during a time when virtual care has been critical to continuity of care.⁵

Even beyond the pandemic, these technologies will continue to expand and integrate, creating a hybrid of in-person and virtual care. These hybrid models will augment, not replace, the human touch, enhancing the patient-provider experience and improving access, quality, and outcomes of care.