

“Pissed Off” Baker Promises Vaccination Site Improvements

By Colin A. Young
State House News Service

Following the Thursday morning failure of the state’s vaccine appointment website as 1 million more people became eligible to get themselves protected against the deadly coronavirus, Gov. Charlie Baker took to the airwaves to pledge that the issue would be fixed.

“My hair’s on fire about the whole thing. I can’t even begin to tell you how pissed off I am,” Baker said on GBH’s “Boston Public Radio” when asked about the website debacle just after noon. He later added, “This is not satisfactory ... it’s awful. It’s going to get fixed and I’m going to work very hard to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Heavy traffic torpedoed the state’s vaccination scheduling website as more than 70,000 appointments were to be made available at 8 a.m. to the seniors and people with multiple health complications who newly qualified for a vaccine Thursday morning. The state said it had not added those appointments to the system by the time it failed.

People visiting the vaxfinder.mass.gov website after 8 a.m. Thursday were met with the message that “this application crashed.” Visitors were advised to try again later. The website was back up at about 10 a.m., though some people reported persistent troubles with it.

“People are working really hard to get it fixed and we know how important it is for people to have it fixed and to be able to access all those new appointments,” Baker said on GBH. “It’s gonna get fixed as fast as it needs to get fixed and, like I said, people did a lot of work preparing for this but

clearly they didn't do enough. And I know how important it is to people to get their shots."

Around 11:30 a.m., the state's COVID-19 Command Center apologized for the website issues and said that some people had been able to book vaccination appointments Thursday morning through secondary websites. Baker said that was about 20,000 appointments and that 50,000 more appointments, mostly at Fenway Park in Boston and Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, would be added once the site was functioning normally again.

"All appointments for mass vax sites in Springfield, Danvers, Natick and Dartmouth have been booked for the next week. More appointments for these sites will be made available next week," a spokesperson for the state's COVID-19 Command Center said. "Additional appointments at other locations will be posted throughout the day today."

When Baker announced Wednesday that people 65 years old or older, the residents and staff of low-income housing for seniors, and people with two or more health conditions that put them at higher risk for hospitalization or death would be able to start booking vaccination appointments at 8 a.m. Thursday, it represented roughly a doubling of the number of people eligible for the limited number of vaccine doses.

"I think the website will be in good shape for this," Baker said Wednesday when asked if the state's website would be ready to handle the added traffic Thursday morning.

The governor said Thursday on GBH that his administration had done a lot of "scenario planning" to prepare for the predictable influx of traffic to the website but "obviously the scenario work that was done didn't adequately prepare the site for what happened when eight o'clock rolled around this morning."

Thursday's website snafu was the latest stumble in the Baker administration's COVID-19 vaccine rollout. House Speaker

Ronald Mariano said the rollout “has been marked by both logistical and communications shortcomings” and Senate President Karen Spilka called it a “constantly changing and confusing” plan.

Complaints from residents in the earliest phases of the plan prompted changes to the state’s appointment website, which was initially just a map of vaccination sites. The administration established a call center to help people access appointments, but only after seniors 75 or older became eligible and reported difficulties using the website. Last week, Baker announced a system in which anyone who brings a senior 75 or older to a mass vaccination site can get vaccinated themselves, regardless of their age or risk factors. That created what is effectively a black market for senior citizen companions in Massachusetts.

The governor said Thursday that more changes are coming to the state’s vaccine distribution plan. Co-host Jim Braude asked Baker why Massachusetts hasn’t established a centralized system where people could pre-register for vaccine doses that would be distributed based on the phases of the state’s existing plans. States like Florida, New Jersey and West Virginia have reported success with similar systems and Sen. Diana DiZoglio recently filed a bill that would mandate the creation of such a centralized system here.

“We are looking at that and we’ll probably have more to say about it over the course of the next few weeks,” Baker said of the kind of system he has so far resisted in Massachusetts. “I won’t get into the nitty-gritty of the details, but it’s different to do this...we have way more sites, a lot more people, it’s a little more complicated to set this up in Massachusetts the way you would set it up in a smaller state. But I do think it’s a topic of conversation and discussion among our team and we’ll have more to say about it shortly, before we get into some of the really big population groups.”

As of Thursday, about 2.1 million of the state's roughly 6.9 million residents are eligible to be vaccinated against the coronavirus that has infected more than half-a-million people here and killed more than 15,600. Baker and other officials cautioned that it could take up to a month for everyone who became eligible Thursday to book an appointment as demand exceeds the supply of vaccine doses from the federal government.

As of Wednesday, 893,312 people in Massachusetts had received a first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and 316,302 of those people had also received a second dose, making them fully vaccinated against COVID-19, according to the Department of Public Health. Massachusetts had administered about 79.2 percent of the 1,158,050 vaccine doses that have been shipped here, DPH said, and administration officials said roughly half of the previous group to become eligible, people 75 or older, had already scheduled vaccination appointments.

Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders, who leads the COVID-19 Command Center, held a call with lawmakers Thursday afternoon organized by Sen. Jo Comerford and Rep. Denise Garlick, during which legislators were able to air their concerns with the administration.

Sudders holds similar calls twice a month for members of the Legislature to ask questions of the administration's COVID-19 response and vaccine plan, but this week's call came at a "shockingly timely" moment, Comerford said.

"What's clear to me and has always been clear is that Secretary Sudders is deeply committed and has gone a superhuman distance to meet this pandemic," Comerford said. "I heard a great deal of acknowledgment of this on the call about the secretary's tireless work, but that was followed by many concerns that we have heard repeatedly, like abrupt decision making, a lack of an understood plan and then of course we were faced with the website delays and the crash and 2-1-1

delays.”

Comerford said legislators were told that the vaccine appointment website was back up and functional as of early afternoon, but she said she had not tested it personally.

“We were told this was really a matter of the system being overloaded and while that’s understandable, it also could have been expected and perhaps prevented,” Comerford said.

Comerford, who next week will help lead an oversight hearing of the administration’s vaccine rollout as co-chair of the new COVID-19 and Emergency Preparedness Committee, said she was glad to hear that the governor had brought up the possibility of pre-registration for future phases, but said, “It’s going to necessitate a real considered, hopefully transparent plan for where these future sign-ups will be held.”

Mariano, the top House Democrat, was among those who tried to book a vaccination appointment Thursday morning.

“As one of the 1 million residents that became eligible to book my COVID-19 vaccines appointments today, I was disappointed to experience difficulties with the VaxFinder website. We all have the responsibility to get our shots as soon as we can,” he said. “I look forward to a productive oversight hearing next week, where we’ll address problems that delay the fair and accessible distribution of vaccines.”

[Matt Murphy contributed to this report.]