

Widen fourth vaccine dose eligibility, critics say

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NEW availability of a second COVID-19 booster dose has left some Manitobans excited and others scratching their heads.

On Wednesday, the province announced a second booster would be offered to anyone age 70 or older, residents of personal care homes and other congregate living sites for elderly people, and Indigenous people 50 or older no matter where they live.

Lindsay Wright ultimately drove across the U.S. border when her 13-year-old daughter was turned away from local pharmacies due to the province's eligibility rules that qualify only some youth for a third dose. On April 1, she took her daughter to Grand Forks, N.D., and got her a booster shot there.

Wright, who is immunocompromised, said Manitoba's decision to offer fourth doses to some while still holding back boosters from others is disappointing.

"My husband is a front-line health-care worker, and he hasn't had a dose in quite a while. I know he would love a fourth dose, knowing what he could potentially be exposed to at work, and how important it is that he shows up for his shift," she told the *Free Press* Wednesday.

"Even teachers in classrooms with kids for eight hours a day... I'm sure teachers would love to be on that list, too. It seems a little arbitrary and Manitoba seems very hesitant to go as far or as fast as other provinces are, and it's frustrating."

Asked for comment, a spokesperson said the province had "nothing further to add" on the subject. Most provinces in Canada have opened up booster appointments to anyone 12 and older.

Wright said she was relieved to get her daughter a third dose, but wasn't hopeful the province would soon put all youth on the list.

"I think if I felt hope in that direction, we would not have gone to the lengths we went to last week... we would have waited a little bit longer," she said. "I'd love to be wrong about that, but it really seems like (Manitoba is) not being very proactive."

The province has been offering fourth doses for moderately to severely immunocompromised youth and adults since December. Residents of First Nations communities age 18 or older were also previously eligible.

However, other vulnerable groups aren't being considered for booster vaccinations, which remains a concern, Manitoba Child Care Association executive director Jodie Kehl said.



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Lindsay Wright says the province's limited expansion of booster eligibility is disappointing.

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"Facilities are definitely seeing increased cases, so there would be concern that we, again, are working with the most vulnerable population right now that have had no vaccinations," said Kehl, a parent of a teen yet not eligible for a booster.

Out of Manitoba's 38,000 licensed child care spaces, around 13,000 are for school-aged children. While some staff are working with kids that have at least

two doses, the majority are working with a largely unvaccinated clientele.

"There are just too many unknowns, so there are concerns around the fact that the youngest population (up to age five) is not eligible for vaccines, now with obviously much more loose (public health) restrictions... that transmission rate has certainly dramatically increased in facilities," Kehl said.

However, Wednesday's news was "exciting" for seniors in personal care

homes and assisted living programs across the province, said Long Term & Continuing Care Association of Manitoba executive director Jan Legeros.

Manitoba has more than 10,000 residents in personal care homes, more than 1,000 in supportive housing, and almost 5,000 seniors in assisted living — and many face a multitude of co-existing conditions, putting them at a heightened risk of severe COVID-19, Legeros said.

Many will receive their fourth doses in-house with the support of nurses either already working at or visiting the facilities, along with mobile clinics run by pharmacists, she said.

Legeros hopes the province will consider shifting its rollout plan to make it more accessible to care home staff.

"I'm hoping that at the same time as they offer the fourth dose to these residents, that they will also offer the third dose to the staff, because we haven't had great uptake with the staff for the third dose," she said.

"Offering it in-house, in the past, we've seen significant uptake from staff. It also sends a message to our staff that we value them and we are interested in keeping them safe and keeping their families safe."

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