

Montgomery County Council
sitting as the Montgomery County Board of Public Health

Hearing on the Fifth Amended Board of Health Regulation
to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the County

April 27, 2021

Testimony of Aaron Droller
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Good morning Council President Hucker and members of the Montgomery County Council. My name is Aaron Droller. I am a resident of Silver Spring and the father of two children, ages 5 and 7. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Board of Health's consideration of the Fifth Amended Board of Health regulation to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Montgomery County.

The proposed regulation, which establishes strict statistical vaccination thresholds for the gradual reopening of Montgomery County, is a dated and unnecessarily punitive approach that should not be approved by this Council. The chosen thresholds are arbitrarily chosen and unsupported by the risk profile of COVID-19 in the County.

I am concerned that by establishing strict statistical thresholds, this County is boxing itself into a closed posture by default. At this point, we are rapidly approaching the threshold where supply of vaccine will outstrip demand, allowing anyone who wants a vaccine to readily obtain it. With that good news, however, is the possibility that getting to the 60% vaccination threshold will prove more challenging and lengthier than anticipated. It is possible, if not probable, that there is a substantial percentage of the population that will refuse to receive the vaccine in the near term. Residents that have responsibly adhered to public health measures and obtained the vaccine should not be held to wait for reopening due to vaccine hesitancy. This is wholly unfair, punitive, and not supported by the rapidly dwindling risk of COVID-19 in this county.

Beyond vaccine hesitancy, we have real world experience that shows a 60% vaccination rate is not necessary to safely reopen. Israel, for example, has had an aggressive vaccination campaign, but has yet to hit the 60% threshold, yet Israel has managed to record extremely low levels of COVID-19.¹

¹ "Covid-19: Israel records no daily deaths for the first time in 10 months," available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-56868383> (last visited April 26, 2021).

Establishing vaccination thresholds at this stage in the pandemic is not supported scientifically and will put the County further behind neighboring jurisdictions.

Rather, as a matter of fairness and public health, the County should base reopening solely on immediate vaccine availability. I recommend the threshold be two weeks after the point whereby anyone in the County can obtain an appointment within 24 hours. At that point, the County should lift all remaining restrictions in accordance with state guidance.

This regulation places a disproportionate burden on children that is not scientifically supported. It would make it unduly cumbersome for summer camps to open and put children into a dangerous situation by forcing masked children out in the summer heat with limited indoor cooling opportunities. Children deserve to have a joyful summer for all they have sacrificed this year. Summer camps should be permitted to open without restrictions this year. It is safe to do so given the extremely small risk COVID-19 poses to children, and that adults and counselors will have ready access to vaccines by the summer.

If the Council chooses to maintain these thresholds, at the very least, you should amend the definition of “population” to only include the vaccine eligible population. It is statistically incoherent to require a certain percentage of the entire population to be vaccinated for reopening, when those under the age of 16 are ineligible to receive an FDA approved vaccine. This language has the effect of increasing the denominator while reducing the available numerator in the ratio, thus artificially raising the actual required vaccination rate of the vaccine eligible population.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am available to answer any questions you may have.