

Gov. Kemp, officials meet with community leaders at LAA to discuss vaccine rollout

Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp made the first-ever visit by a sitting governor to the Latin American Association today, pledging to collaborate with community leaders to speed the Covid-19 vaccine rollout to Georgia's Hispanic community.

Kemp, accompanied by Dr. Kathleen Toomey, commissioner of the Georgia Department of Public Health, and Insurance Commissioner John King, met with LAA CEO Santiago Marquez and other officials, including Consul General of Mexico Javier Diaz de Leon and State Representatives Pedro Marin and Zulma Lopez.

Marquez said the meeting centered around the rollout of the Covid-19 vaccines in the Latino community and the need for both access and information. "The need is enormous," Marquez said.

Jimmy McDonald, general counsel and director of government affairs for the Georgia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, moderated the discussion between Kemp and the officials present.

"This is the next phase of the pandemic," he said, "trying to make sure our community gets access to the vaccine."

Toomey said the pandemic has improved markedly in Georgia, with Covid hospitalizations in the state down from 30% to 8.2%.

"We're in a really good place right now," she said. "I'm so optimistic with what we're seeing in our numbers."

Now, the job is to get as many Georgians vaccinated as quickly as possible.

Kemp said the decision on March 10 to lower the age of eligibility to 55 and to add a number of other health conditions makes 3 million more Georgians eligible to receive the vaccine.

"We'll move very quickly now," he said. "If we get any wavering in demand, we'll increase eligibility."

The governor said it is likely all Georgians will be eligible to receive the vaccine by April 1.

"It's up to all of us to work together to build confidence, to make sure everyone understands how safe and effective it is."

But that brings up the special needs of the Latino community, which needs to hear official information in both English and Spanish, and for which there is hesitancy about getting vaccinated, as well as a raft of misinformation, including concerns about cost and privacy.

Toomey said there's a need for better messaging, including micro-messaging to specific communities.

"Me in a PSA (public service announcement) is not going to persuade anyone except for my neighbors," she said.

Instead, the state and communities need a multi-pronged, multi-disciplinary approach.

Kemp said the state would work closely with community leaders to speed access to the vaccine for Latinos and to combat misinformation, which has made some Latinos hesitant and even fearful of getting vaccinated. He said the vaccine is free to all, regardless of immigration status, insurance is not required, and information that patients provide is private and confidential.

Because some Latinos might be intimidated by mass vaccination sites, the state will provide vaccines through other means, including mobile units and pop-up sites, as well as through private sector partners such as Walmart, Walgreen's CVS and others.

King, the insurance commissioner, said the state will look to heavily Hispanic cities such as Gainesville, home of Georgia's poultry industry, and Dalton, home of its flooring industry, to identify key leaders who can be spokespersons and ambassadors for the vaccine rollout.

In a press conference that followed the discussion among officials and community leaders, Marquez said the group discussed not just problems but solutions, and noted it was the first time a sitting Georgia governor had visited the Latin American Association, a sign of how important it is to get vaccine information out to Latinos here.

Kemp described the discussion as "frank" and said, "We're going to continue working with the great stakeholders we have," testing best practices, and tackling issues such as vaccine hesitancy and communication.

"We had a great discussion today, the first of many," Kemp said.