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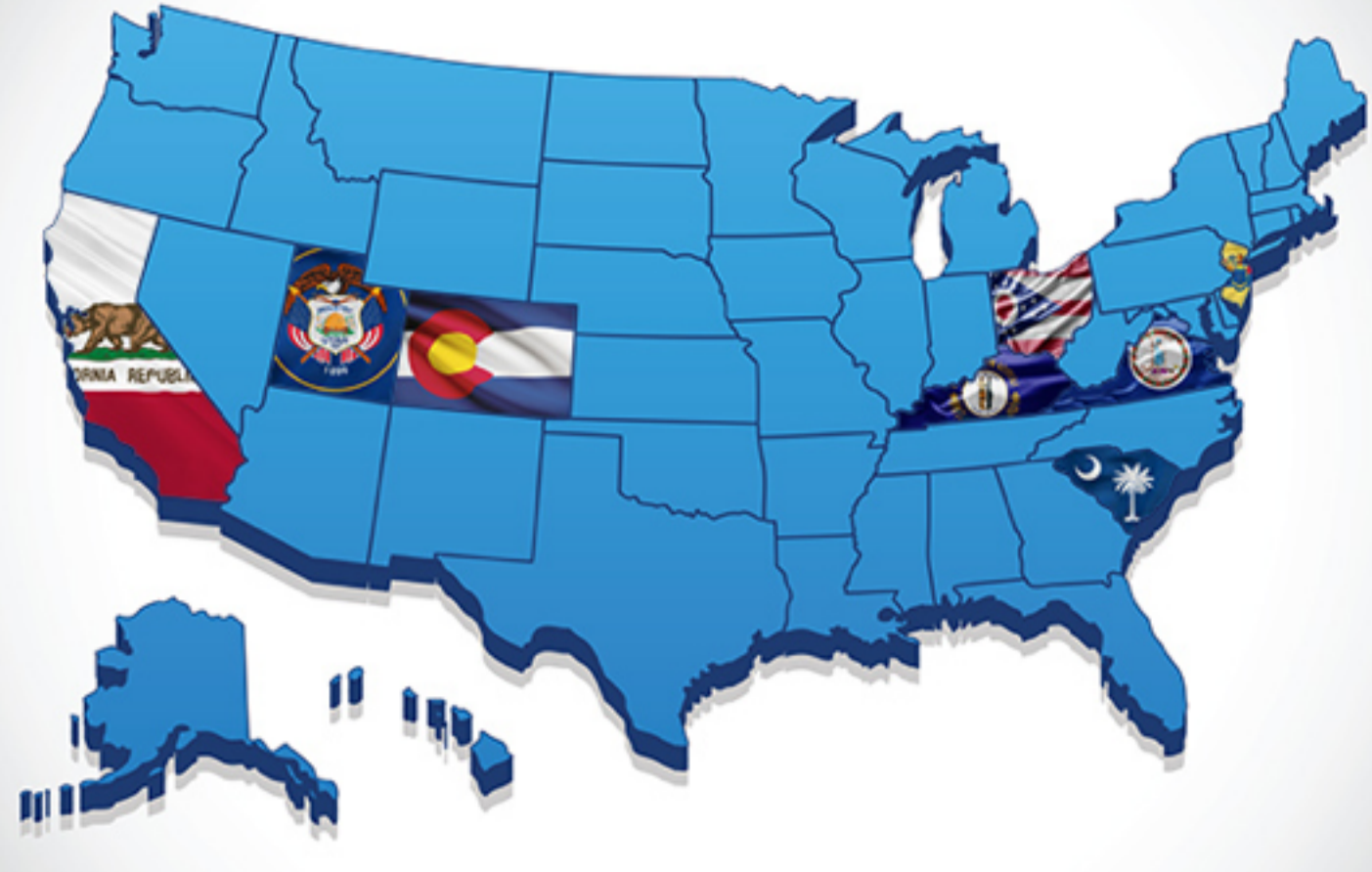
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## 8 states authorize doctors of optometry to give COVID-19 vaccinations: The latest

MARCH 4, 2021

Congresswoman encourages federal recognition of optometry's utility in COVID-19 vaccinations nationwide as more states activate doctors of optometry alongside new vaccine developments.



Coming off the worst stretch of U.S. COVID-19 infections to date, public health officials warn a weeks-long downturn in cases now appears stalled despite herculean efforts to hasten the nation's vaccination campaign.

On March 1, [the White House COVID-19 Response Team](#) noted that coronavirus case counts presently are only about a third of what the nation experienced during a record-devastating holiday surge that saw over 250,000 cases/day. However, an uptick in four new variants circulating unmitigated and a general slackening of pandemic precautions drew concerns that a 2% week-over-week increase in both cases and deaths nationally may be indicative of a rebound after new cases plateaued at 70,000/day.

"At this level of cases, with variants spreading, we stand to completely lose the hard-earned ground we have gained," said Rochelle Walensky, M.D., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) director, during the White house briefing. "These variants are a very real threat to our people and our progress. Now is not the time to relax the critical safeguards that we know can stop the spread of COVID-19 in our communities, not when we are so close."

Warning of a potential fourth surge in cases, Dr. Walensky noted the CDC has documented several thousand cases of the four new and more contagious coronavirus variants nationwide with experts anticipating one strain—the B.1.1.7 (British) variant—becoming predominant throughout March.

The precarious situation comes as [President Joe Biden announced](#) March 2 that the U.S. will have enough COVID-19 vaccine for every adult in the nation by the end of May, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration granted emergency use approval for Johnson & Johnson's one-dose vaccine. That vaccine does not require the ultra-cold storage requirements of either Moderna's or Pfizer's two-dose inoculations with vials able to be stored at 36-46F. Yet supply is only one aspect of the nation's COVID-19 vaccination campaign.

"It's not enough to have the vaccine supply," President Biden said. "We need vaccinators—people to put the shots in people's arms, millions of Americans' arms."

### Federal recognition of optometry as COVID-19 vaccinators

Going on to detail federal efforts to expand eligible vaccinators, as well as the need for expanding vaccination sites, President Biden reiterated that the pandemic fight is far from over and more needs to be accomplished to effect a positive change. That is why the AOA continues to advocate that optometry stands ready, willing and able to leverage the profession's widespread accessibility.

Overall, more than 90% of the Medicare beneficiary population—those most at-risk for COVID-19 complications—live within 15 minutes of a doctor of optometry, and a growing number of states have authorized optometry to administer injections. In addition to reiterating these points in [letters to Biden's administration and congressional leadership in January](#), a Congresswoman is taking up optometry's arguments and urging the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to authorize doctors of optometry to help administer vaccines in local communities.

In a letter signed by Rep. Yvette Clarke, D-N.Y., the congresswoman emphasized the need to reach traditionally underserved communities and that untapped health professionals, such as doctors of optometry, can support vaccine administration in both rural and urban communities. Rep. Clarke notes that the National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness outlines a need for expanding eligible vaccinators and urges optometry's authorization under the Public Readiness and Emergency Preparedness (PREP) Act for the duration of the public health emergency.

"Providing this authority to doctors of optometry would provide a range of communities with quick, safe and easy access to these vital vaccinations," Rep. Clarke's letter reads.

"We strongly believe that a declaration by HHS under the PREP Act would allow doctors of optometry across the country to join their colleagues already on the front lines in a growing number of states that have already granted optometrists' vaccination authority."

### States granting optometry COVID-19 vaccination authority

Concurrently, affiliates continue to work with their state administrations to underscore [optometry's availability as vaccinators during this public health emergency](#). Eight states now explicitly grant doctors of optometry authority to administer COVID-19 vaccines, including:

- California
- Colorado\*
- Kentucky
- New Jersey
- Ohio
- South Carolina
- Utah
- Virginia

In South Carolina, a joint resolution signed into law by Gov. Henry McMaster in late February expanded COVID-19 vaccine administration authority to doctors of optometry participating at a vaccination site, conditioned on completion of several training programs. These programs include a general overview, safety and vaccine-specific information available through the CDC.

At the time, Rep. West Cox, R-S.C. Dist. 10, argued that such authorization was crucial to ensuring all Palmetto State residents had equitable access to the vaccine, administered by qualified and "outstanding health care professionals."

"Optometrists around the state have led the push on this and will now be allowed to [administer vaccines] under state law," Rep. Cox said. "Their desire to help with the delivery and administration of vaccines shows their passion and desire for the people of South Carolina."

Added Michele Donovan, O.D., South Carolina Optometric Physicians Association president: "Many South Carolina optometric physicians are excited to be able to help in our communities, giving the COVID-19 vaccine. Hopefully with our help, more people will be able to access those vaccines sooner."

Similarly, in [Virginia](#), Gov. Ralph Northam signed emergency legislation—S.B. 1445 and H.B. 2333—in late February that permits any qualified and available health care provider in the state to volunteer as a COVID-19 vaccine administrator. The legislation allows doctors of optometry to volunteer at vaccination events statewide, provided they register with the health department and medical reserve corps, as well as complete provider education training. These moves also come as Colorado Gov. Jared Polis signed an executive order in recent weeks to temporarily expand the state's COVID-19 vaccinator force to include optometry. Reportedly, volunteer vaccinators are encouraged to sign up on Colorado's Volunteer Mobilizer site.

Learn more about affiliates efforts to ensure emergency [authorization as COVID-19 vaccinators](#).

### Access AOA's vaccinators resources

The U.S. COVID-19 vaccination campaign requires a concerted effort on the part of every available health care provider to achieve widespread immunity by mid-2021. Therefore, the AOA is committed to advocating on behalf of the profession and preparing doctors to assist in these vaccination efforts when and where their localities allow.

Consider accessing these AOA resources with more information on utilizing doctors of optometry as COVID-19 vaccinators:

- [#AskAOA Update on COVID Vaccines](#). Available on the [AOA's EyeLearn Professional Development Hub](#), this #AskAOA webinar provides information related to serving as a vaccinator. Pharmacist Jason Wong describes administration, legal and regulatory compliance standards and where to seek the latest vaccine information.
- [Doctors of Optometry and Vaccine Administration: The Facts](#). This AOA fact sheet is available to assist doctors in advocating for their inclusion as eligible COVID-19 vaccinators.

Learn more about the AOA's federal advocacy and ongoing reprioritization in support of doctors of optometry during the nation's public health emergency at the [AOA's COVID-19 Crisis Response page](#).

\*Clarification: This article was updated 3/5/21 to reflect Colorado as the eighth state that permits doctors of optometry to provide COVID-19 vaccinations.

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While the COVID-19 crisis is remodeled for the 2021 year, AOA affiliates, including Arkansas, managed to successfully navigate the pandemic and opposition from ophthalmology to expand care for treating patients.

