



U.S. & World

N.B. & Canada

Moncton

Saint John

Fredericton

Miramichi

COVID-19

Province 'irresponsible' not to give migrants vaccine priority: advocate



A group of temporary foreign workers is shown in a file photo.
Photo: Hi-Berry Farm/Postmedia News

© Published 9 hours ago



David Gordon Koch | Times & Transcript

Plans for the vaccination of migrant workers remain unclear two weeks after Premier Blaine Higgs said he would look into whether they might receive the COVID-19 vaccine in their country of origin.

Advocates say migrants are essential workers who face high levels of risk as they travel around the world to work in the fields and seafood plants of New Brunswick, and one professor called the decision not to prioritize them "unconscionable and irresponsible."

During Thursday's COVID-19 update, Dr. Jennifer Russell, New Brunswick's chief medical officer of health, didn't respond directly to a question about whether migrant workers in New Brunswick will have access to a vaccine.

Maritime provinces have been talking about measures such as the self-isolation and testing of migrant workers, she said, calling last year's safety protocols "very successful."

"What worked last summer worked really well, so we weren't planning to deviate from that plan at this point in time," she said, adding that plans may change as new information becomes available.

Asked if it's unfair that migrant workers may travel from poor countries to work in New Brunswick without guaranteed access to

a vaccine, neither Russell nor Minister of Health Dorothy Shephard responded.

In March, Premier Blaine Higgs told reporters he's mulling a requirement for migrant workers to be vaccinated before arrival, saying the province would work with Ottawa to determine which countries are capable of providing the vaccine to migrant workers.

But most temporary foreign workers are from countries that will be last in the queue to receive the vaccine, said immigration lawyer Jael Duarte, a member of the advocacy group No One Is Illegal-Fredericton.

"We can't rely on those countries," Duarte said.

Disparity has marked the global roll-out of COVID-19 vaccinations. By Thursday, roughly one third of Americans and 17 per cent of Canadians had received at least one dose, according to official data collated by the website Our World in Data.

Those numbers were lower in countries of origin for migrants who work in New Brunswick.

The share of people that had received at least one dose in Mexico was seven per cent. For Jamaica, the most recent available data was from April 1, when just 1.4 per cent of the population had received a dose of vaccine.

And less than one per cent of the population of the Philippines had received a dose by March 30, the most recent data available.

Raluca Bejan, assistant professor of social work at Dalhousie University, cited information from the federal government indicating that Canada has contracts for vaccine doses far exceeding its population.

In an email, she questioned why migrants who pay taxes in Canada shouldn't benefit from the vaccine rollout.

"The rich country already benefits from their labour," she said. "It's time Canada foots the bill for their safety."

Bejan is among a group of researchers studying the health and safety of temporary foreign workers in the region.

Kristi Allain, an associate professor of sociology at St. Thomas University also involved in the project, said their research shows workers in agribusiness "often live in cramped quarters and work in close proximity to other workers at farms and fish plants in the region."

She called the decision not to prioritize migrant workers "both unconscionable and irresponsible."

"These workers have risked their lives, travelling to Canada in a health pandemic – a time when Canadians have been told to protect their health by staying home," she said.

Bruce Macfarlane, a spokesperson for the Department of Health, didn't respond to questions about whether the province is looking into mandatory vaccination before arrival, or what countries of

origin might have the capacity to vaccinate migrant workers before they travel to Canada.

"Vaccinations have been made available to priority populations first," he said in an April 1 email, noting efforts by Public Health to reduce the risk of COVID-19 being imported by migrant workers into Canada.

Those include strengthened self-isolation requirements, daily pre-screening protocols and mandated testing on the tenth day of isolation, he said.

No One Is Illegal-Fredericton previously issued a letter, co-signed by a number of organized labour and community groups and businesses, calling for the inclusion of migrant workers in the second-stage rollout.

In December, the National Advisory Committee on Immunization recommended the second stage of vaccinations include health-care workers not already vaccinated, along with "residents and staff of all other congregate settings" and essential workers.

- With files from Savannah Awde