

HABITAT

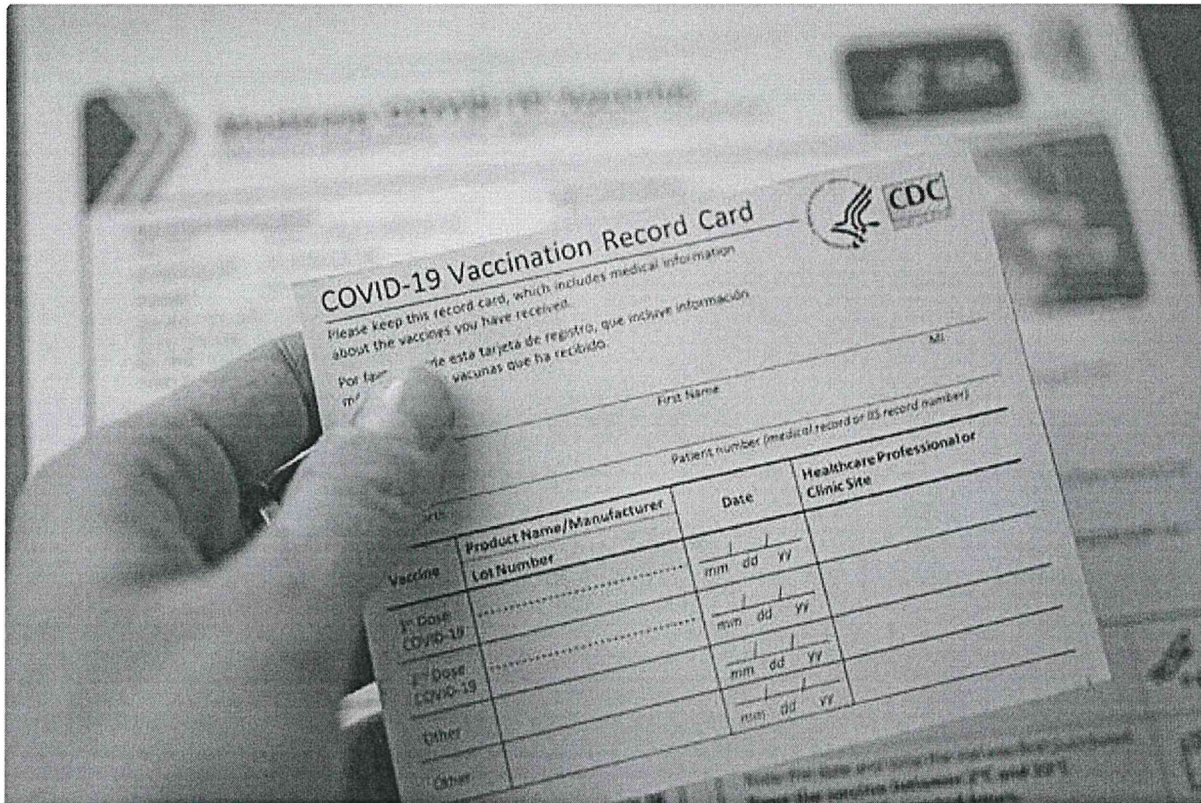
BRICKS & BUCKS

BUILDING PROJECTS IN NYC CO-OPS/CONDOS

Co-op and Condo Staffers Say They're Essential Workers and Deserve Vaccines

Paula Chin in Bricks & Bucks on February 17, 2021

New York State



Co-op and condo staffers contend they're essential workers and thus deserve to get vaccinated.

Feb. 17, 2021

As part of New York State's phased distribution of the **COVID-19** vaccines, **Gov. Andrew Cuomo** has announced that as of Feb. 15, people with certain health problems – including cancer, heart conditions and compromised immune systems – are now eligible to get their shots. That group joins the expanding list of front-line **essential workers** – including first responders, transit workers and public-facing grocery store workers – who have already been moved to the top of the Phase 1b list.

That still leaves many groups that were deemed essential during the peak of the pandemic off the vaccine priority list. Among these are building services employees such as **co-op and condo staffers**, an omission that has the **property management industry** up in arms.

"They've been on the front lines working 24/7 since day one," says **Claudine Gruen**, vice president and director of operations at **Garthchester Realty**. "These employees are in contact with hundreds and hundreds of families in buildings every single day. Many of them are getting sick, and the work is harder than it's ever been. Truthfully, they are first responders."

David Baron, principal at **Metro Management**, shares Gruen's concerns. "I've seen an explosion of employees in the building industry coming down with COVID-19," he says. "I don't disagree that the vaccine eligibility list should be opened up to people who are at **high risk of severe illness**, but it's been clear from the outset that these (building) workers, along with management personnel, are essential to maintaining the health and safety of residents in their buildings and are directly in the line of fire. They need their vaccines just as much."

For her part, Gruen is having a hard time comprehending a disconnect: when the pandemic first hit, New York State included building cleaning and maintenance among essential services that had to continue; yet the workers who perform these mandated services have still not been moved to the top of the vaccine list. After writing a letter in protest, Gruen received a response from Cuomo's office saying that "the universe of who was deemed essential at the peak of the pandemic cannot be used as a prioritizing (tool) at this point in time." The letter asked for patience until **vaccine supplies** increase. In the meantime, Gruen says, "My staff members are coming to me and saying, 'Are you going to get us the shot? You know we're essential.' And I'm like, 'Yes, you are absolutely essential.' But at this point, it just seems there's no consideration for them."

Patience is running thin. "The governor and his team have a tough challenge because demand greatly exceeds supply, and the supply chain is currently tenuous," says **Howard Rothschild**, president of the **Realty Advisory Board (RAB)**, which negotiates union contracts on behalf of building owners, including co-op and condo boards. "The RAB is advocating on behalf of the industry to give vaccination priority to our employees, but there are a lot of people who believe in good faith that they should be next."

Rothschild notes that there are "encouraging signs" that several **new vaccines** could soon be ready for approval, which could add **millions of doses** to available supplies. "But when that will be," he adds, "no one knows."
