

Tap local airlines for COVID vaccine transport – solon

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Quezon City Rep. **Precious Hipolito Castelo** has proposed that the country's major airline companies be tapped in the transportation and delivery of COVID-19 vaccines to the country.

The House Assistant Majority Leader said the government could seek the support of Philippine Airlines (PAL) and other domestic air carriers in transporting the vaccines.

"I am assuming that we will get the vaccines from where they are being produced. Instead of foreign carriers, let us use local airlines to help them earn more at this time of pandemic so they would keep their employees," she said in a statement.

Noting that it would take more than 50 Boeing 777 freighters to fly 60 million doses to Manila, tapping foreign airlines in the transport of vaccines should also be considered in the event that the country's air carriers fail to meet the requirements, the House leader said.

She noted that aside from PAL, other major domestic airlines such as AirAsia Philippines and Cebu Pacific could play a big role in the transportation of vaccines to the regions, provinces, cities, and towns.

"The government can help them avoid shedding more manpower if it can engage their services in the delivery of the vaccine," she said.

Castelo also cited anew the need for the government to start preparing cold storage facilities for storing and safekeeping of COVID-19 vaccines in anticipation of their arrival and mass distribution to the Filipino people.

She had earlier filed House Bill No. 8000 or the proposed "Vaccine-Ready Philippines Act of 2020" urging the government to amply prepare cold storage facilities for the vaccines. "Considering that our country is a populous nation and is an archipelago, a safe and effective mass distribution of the vaccine requires ample planning and preparation," she said. HB No. 8000 tasks the Department of Health (DOH) to determine the specifications of the cold storage facility necessary for the anticipated COVID-19 vaccines.

"DOH shall urgently prepare for the provision of cold storage facilities in accordance with the specifications that are suitable for safekeeping of the anticipated COVID-19 vaccines," the measure provides.

Citing some accounts, Castelo said vaccines can be stable for 30 days at temperatures ranging from two degrees to eight degrees Celsius.

"Establishing or finding safe storage facilities with such specification and standard in Metro Manila, the regions, and in provinces, cities, and towns will be a big challenge for the DOH," she said.

COVID vaccine storage

The country must be prepared to handle the storage of COVID-19 vaccines, House Deputy Speaker Surigao del Sur Rep. Johnny Pimentel said Sunday.

Pimentel underscored the need to keep such vaccines at low temperatures during storage or else their efficacy might get compromised.

“The vaccination of an initial batch of 35 million Filipinos is bound to call for the mobilization of a wide-range of cold storage assets – from temperature-controlled refrigerated trucking services to ample supplies of dry ice. The logistical challenge is enormous, considering that everybody will need two shots of the vaccine at an interval of 19 to 42 days,” said Pimentel, a COVID19 survivor,

He noted that the most promising COVID-19 vaccine is reputed to be 95 percent effective, but has to be stored in ultra-low temperature packed in dry ice.

American pharmaceutical giant Pfizer Inc., which jointly developed the vaccine with German biotech firm BioNTech SE, has designed distribution containers that can keep the shots at the required temperature of negative 70 degrees Celsius for 10 days if unopened. The distribution containers can also be used for temporary storage in a vaccination facility, such as a hospital, for up to 30 days as long as they are reloaded with dry ice every five days. Once thawed, the vaccines can be stored in a refrigerator at two to eight degrees Celsius for up to five days.

As such, Pimentel said the COVID19 immunization campaign in country will require the comprehensive listing of all available cold chain logistics solutions that can be marshaled to rapidly deploy the vaccines.

“This early, we would expect our Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases to make an inventory of all obtainable cold storage provisions, including those held by private firms, that can be harnessed to deliver the vaccines across the country without delay,” he said.

“We have to be geared up to cope, if we want to swiftly vaccinate millions of Filipinos, especially the most vulnerable ones such as our healthcare workers, those aged 65 years old and above and those with underlying ailments,” added the solon, who also serves as Partido Demokratiko Pilipino-Lakas ng Bayan (PDP-Laban) spokesman.

At present, the DOH has only one bulk cold storage facility at the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine in Muntinlupa City.

While the DOH has a long-term plan to put up regional cold storage warehouses as part of its modern supply chain for temperature-sensitive medical supplies, Pimentel expressed concern that the facilities may not be built in time for the COVID-19 vaccination campaign.

“We may have to rely on cold chain solutions that are already available,” he said.

The United Kingdom on Dec. 2 became the first country in the world to approve the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for emergency use in a COVID-19 public inoculation program. The US Food and Drug Administration is expected to consider on Dec. 10 the possible approval of the same vaccine for emergency use in America.