

LAWMAKER WANTS THOSE MISHANDLING VACCINES, JUMPING THE LINE PENALIZED

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A House official wants to amend the country's COVID-19 vaccination law by criminalizing the mishandling of life-saving vaccines and "jumping" the line of the vaccine priority list.

Quezon City Rep. **Precious Castelo** will file a bill giving more teeth to Republic Act No. 11525, or the COVID-19 Vaccination Program Act.

"Vaccine queue jumping and mishandling, which results in wastage should be considered criminal offenses. Penalties should be imposed on offenders. There should be accountability," she said.

Such actions "deny healthcare workers and senior citizens their COVID-19 shots and their protection from the virus" even if they are top priorities for vaccination.

"Mishandling also affects our timetable back to normalcy and to hasten economic recovery. It is preventable and therefore cannot be made an alibi for incompetence or even stupidity," Castelo said.

She made the remarks amid reports that 7,500 doses of AstraZeneca vaccines deployed to the Bicol region were returned to the Department of Health in Manila.

The vaccines were stored in a box with a defective temperature reader, thus raising concerns that the vaccines' efficacy may have been compromised.

Under RA 11525, the mishandling of vaccines and vaccine queue jumpers cannot be held criminally liable since the law only penalizes those who falsify COVID-19 vaccination cards.

Public officials who get vaccinated ahead of health workers may face administrative sanctions.

The Department of the Interior and Local Government has issued show cause orders against five mayors who received vaccines against COVID-19, supposedly to boost vaccine confidence among their constituents.

Actor Mark Anthony Fernandez was also vaccinated because he had hypertension and was on a quick substitution list of people who may get inoculated if health workers refused the jabs. Under the vaccine prioritization framework, health workers and those working in medical facilities would be prioritized for COVID-19 vaccination.

Next in line are senior citizens and persons with comorbidities, followed by front-line employees in essential sectors and uniformed personnel. The rest of the population are last to be prioritized.

The government has repeatedly warned vaccine queue jumpers that their actions could jeopardize the Philippines' allocation of donated vaccines from the COVAX facility.