

## House bill seeks mandatory vaccination for herd immunity

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A senior administration lawmaker yesterday filed a bill in the House of Representatives that aims to achieve “mandatory” herd immunity for 110 million Filipinos.



Cavite Rep. Elpidio Barzaga Jr., chairman of the House committee on natural resources, filed House Bill 9252 for purposes of attaining herd immunity, based on the “general welfare” clause of the 1987 Constitution where government is bound to protect its citizens.

“As legislators, we have a legal responsibility to pass a law to further prevent the introduction, transmission and spread of COVID-19 and address our present crisis,” he said. “A person who is not vaccinated is a risk to the lives of others and to the general public.”

However, the Department of Health (DOH), through Undersecretary Maria Rosario Vergeire, has expressed opposition to Barzaga’s proposal.

Barzaga – a certified public accountant and lawyer by profession – pointed out that a mandatory mass COVID-19 vaccination program is a must in order to solve the present global pandemic and achieve local herd immunity, where at least 70 percent of the country’s population are inoculated.

“In order to safely achieve herd immunity, a substantial proportion of a population would need to be vaccinated. This would lower the overall amount of virus able to spread in the whole population,” he explained.

“One of the aims with working towards herd immunity is to keep vulnerable groups who cannot get vaccinated, especially those who, due to health conditions, safe and protected from the COVID-19 virus,” Barzaga pointed out.

Also at the House, Quezon City Rep. Precious Hipolito Castelo urged the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) to allow home vaccination for house-bound persons like bedridden individuals and those physically impaired.

“There are many of our people who cannot go out of their home due to sickness, age or physical disability. For them, the IATF and the Department of Health could arrange home inoculation for these most vulnerable citizens through local government units,” she said.

She said the target individuals or their relatives could register with their barangays, whose officials could check on their condition.

“Alternatively, barangay officers could seek them out. They could request for volunteer doctors or nurses who could do the vaccination so as not to further burden health care workers in LGU immunization centers. The DOH and LGUs could just monitor the home inoculation,” she said.

She added that home vaccination would ensure that “no one would be left out in the government’s immunization program against COVID-19.”

“As health advocates would say at this time of pandemic, no one is safe until everyone is safe,” Castelo stressed.

She pointed out that home vaccination would complement her proposal for the IATF to allow private subdivisions or villages to do their own vaccination for residents.

Right to decide

But at a briefing yesterday, Vergeire said Barzaga’s proposal, if approved, would violate the right of an individual to decide for oneself.

“Even before we started the vaccination rollout, we already discussed whether to have it mandatory or voluntary,” she said.

She added they decided to pursue “purely voluntary” inoculation in adherence to the position of the World Health Organization and the Strategic Advisory Group of Experts.

“It will be their right to decide whether to accept or not the vaccine based on our explanation to them,” she said. Vergeire added that at this stage, COVID-19 vaccines “are still at developmental stage” so administering jabs cannot be forced on anyone.

“We cannot mandate people to accept these vaccines because this is still not really completed yet,” she said. The official added that they just adhere to the principle that the vaccines’ “benefits outweigh the risk and that’s why we are offering it to our people.”

President Duterte has no stand yet on the issue, according to Malacañang, which claimed that public confidence in COVID-19 shots is improving.

“The President has no position yet on this. We think vaccine confidence is improving so our problem now is the supply of vaccines are not enough for people who want to be vaccinated,” presidential spokesman Harry Roque said at a press briefing.

Roque, nevertheless, noted that the state has police power and can require everyone to be inoculated if it’s really necessary.

“But for now, it seems that there is no need to make it mandatory because we are waiting for the bulk of the vaccines we ordered. So it is just right that while we do not have the bulk of our vaccines, not everyone wants to be vaccinated,” he added.

Roque said the decision of private companies with regard to COVID-19 inoculation should be respected.

“No, because as I said, the government requiring the vaccination is not out of the question because it is part of police power,” the Palace spokesman said when asked about the view that the private sector may make the immunization mandatory for workers.

“But if employers require it for continued employment, we should respect the decision of employers,” he added.