# Wall Street banks go to the front of the line for H1N1 shots

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With millions who need the the H1N1 vaccine unable to get it, major financial firms in New York, among them Citigroup and Goldman Sachs, have received larger distributions of the inoculation than many hospitals.

As of late October, Citigroup had been given 1,200 doses, more than half of its request, and Goldman Sachs had received 200 doses of the 5,400 it requested, about 4 percent.

By contrast, a major New York City hospital, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, has been given only 200 of 27,400 doses, less than 1 percent of what it asked for its doctors, nurses, and staff, who will be responsible for caring for the sick in the event of a major outbreak.

Nationwide, hospitals, clinics, and pediatricians have received only a small fraction of what they need, a result of the failure of major pharmaceutical corporations to produce an adequate supply as promised.

Just over 35 million doses of the vaccine are now available, but there are nearly 160 million Americans defined as “high risk” who should be inoculated. According to a survey by the Harvard School of Public Health, only about one third of those who have tried to get the vaccine have been able to do so.

All over the country, the dearth of the vaccine has resulted in long lines at hospitals and clinics, school closures, and a rising number of deaths. H1N1 has claimed the lives of more than 1,000 in the US and 5,000 globally.

The distribution to Goldman Sachs, Citigroup, and 13 other New York City-based organizations—including JP Morgan Chase, Time Warner, and the Federal Reserve Board of New York—was ordered by local health officials and approved by the Obama administration’s Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Spokesmen for Citigroup and Goldman Sachs claim that the vaccines have only been administered to employees in high-risk categories, including pregnant women. “Like other responsible employers, [Goldman Sachs] has requested vaccine and will supply it only to employees who qualify,” a company representative said.

These assurances mean little. Having been given the vaccine dosages, the banks distribute them without supervision. More to the point, why should wealthy executives and traders—even those with compromised immune systems—be given precedence over health care workers, children, and pregnant women in the public at large? Why can’t the bankers and traders at the Wall Street firms go wait in line like everyone else?

Aware that the spectacle of flu vaccine hoarding by the same big Wall Street firms that received hundreds of billions in taxpayer bailout money could trigger a public backlash, the Obama administration has shifted to damage control.

Dr. Thomas R. Frieden, director of the CDC, wrote a letter to health officers warning them that policies “that appear to direct the vaccine to people outside the identified priority groups have the potential to undermine the credibility of the program.”

The Obama administration and public health officials in New York have alternately claimed the decision to put the big banks at the front of the line was a mistake, and defended the policy as “a great avenue for vaccinating people at risk,” as Jessica Scaperotti of New York City’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene put it.

Such protestations are absurd. From both a medical and organizational standpoint, hospitals, elementary schools and nursing homes are much better candidates for the distribution of immunizations.

This is confirmed by the CDC’s own list of at-risk populations, which includes children and health care workers, teenagers, people caring for infants under the age of six months, pregnant women, and those with respiratory health problems. These categories hardly call to mind the well-heeled executives and traders at Wall Street banks.

What underlays the decision to distribute immunizations to major private entities ahead of hospitals and schools is neither a mistake nor an objective assessment of the medical value of such distributions.

The episode demonstrates the supremacy of America’s financial elite, which increasingly dictates every policy decision and every facet of social life, and more and more takes on the trappings of an aristocracy. Any government response to a disaster of nature, disease, or, soon enough, social revolt, will take as its first order of business the preservation of this narrow layer.

The inescapable essence of the matter is this: it is taken for granted in government that the lives and health of the rich are worth more than those of the working class. The vaccine distribution to Goldman Sachs and Citigroup was not “caught” precisely because the banks’ privileged position is assumed.

Yet the arrogance and presumptuousness of the financial aristocracy is itself becoming an explosive factor in the political life of the nation.

This has been reflected in the public reaction to the revelations about the vaccine distribution to Wall Street, and the phony denunciations by the likes of Democratic Senator Christopher Dodd, who has been for many years among the most favored recipients of the finance industry’s campaign contributions.

The allocation of scarce vaccines to the big banks is in fact entirely in keeping with the Obama administration’s response to the economic crisis. The US government has given over trillions to the banking industry to help it profit from the financial collapse of its own making. Meanwhile, the Obama administration refuses any jobs program that would counter mass unemployment, as the official jobless rate surges over 10 percent.

The revelation that Goldman Sachs, Citigroup, and others have cornered for themselves a share of the vaccine supply is yet another example of destructive impact of the capitalist market on public health.

Last spring, the Obama administration turned over the production of the vaccine to a handful of large pharmaceutical firms. Because the industry finds vaccines unprofitable, it relies on outdated production methods. This explains the shortage of the vaccine.

But even were there an adequate supply, it would have to be distributed through an American public health system that has been the victim of decades of cuts and layoffs—a trend accelerated in the current economic crisis. The situation is such that President Obama declared a national emergency on October 23, relaxing rules so special distribution centers might be put in place.