Physicians play an important role in the massive effort to vaccinate our nation for COVID-19, not only as trusted counselors and confidants but as credible sources of information to build vaccine confidence and dispel the mountain of misinformation circulating online. The time has come for physicians to take a more commanding position.

To do so, we need to expand vaccine access to frontline physician practices. Far too many physician practices around the country continue to be overlooked in both state and national vaccine strategies. Some independent practices have figured into the allocation plans put forth by certain states but not in others. Our AMA believes this omission is a missed opportunity on multiple levels.

It is important to understand the crucial role physicians in private practice play in many communities, often as the face and trusted voice of our health system at large. Studies suggest that people who may distrust large hospital systems, or health institutions in general, tend to trust their personal doctors.

Seldom has this mattered more than at this critical stage of the pandemic, when people understandably have a lot of questions and perhaps some concerns about the accelerated process to develop these safe and effective vaccines for COVID-19. But in the current distribution system, many physicians cannot offer an appointment for a vaccine and instead can only refer patients to their local or state health departments, a pharmacy chain, or some other institution such as a hospital.

We know how challenging that process remains, even for tech-savvy individuals with ready access to the internet. These problems are compounded for elderly patients or those who cannot get online. Allowing patients to call a physician’s office for a vaccine appointment obviates the need to navigate an internet-based platform and replaces frustrating complexity with badly needed flexibility.

Another missed opportunity lies with failing to leverage existing physician-patient relationships, which allow for quick and easy identification of patients with co-morbidities that place them at higher risk of hospitalization and death from COVID-19. A physician’s office can provide vulnerable patients—even those who lack a primary-care doctor or who may not have seen a physician in many years—with a
comfortable and secure environment where their concerns will be heard, their questions will be answered, and the vaccine safely administered.

Ensuring that physician offices receive vaccine allocations will also boost the rate at which traditionally underserved populations receive them. Mass vaccination sites in urban areas are not always easily reached even by those who live in the same city, while those residing in distant or rural locations are at an even greater disadvantage. Physicians working in those communities are one of the easiest and most accessible options for these patients—provided that their offices receive vaccine allocations, of course.

Boosting vaccine confidence has become a prime consideration now that millions more of us are benefitting from an expanding supply of doses. Physicians are in the best position to accomplish that based on the direct and open conversations we routinely have with our patients, the way we work with them to decide on the best path forward, and how we thus earn the trust that is at the heart of the patient-physician relationship.

Experience has shown us that patients place great trust in a strong, positive recommendation from a physician, and that the information and education provided by physicians and other health care professionals results in higher rates of vaccine acceptance.

As the vaccine supply continues to expand, we are hopeful that physicians seeking the ability to administer vaccines to their patients will be able to do so. We urge the Biden administration to immediately work with the states to facilitate vaccine distribution to physician offices.