



The Center Square

Justice's multimillion-dollar vaccine incentives receive mixed reviews

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Policy groups are split on the likely effectiveness of West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice's multimillion dollar incentive program designed to get more residents vaccinated against COVID-19.

Justice is offering a \$100 gift card or savings bond to those between the ages of 16 and 35 who receive the vaccine. At this stage, more than \$2 million has already been paid out. The governor also is creating a lottery-style incentive in which all vaccinated West Virginians can enter to win prizes, including checks that could be \$1 million, pickup trucks and college scholarships.

The governor has not announced the rules of the lottery program or all of the prizes people will be eligible to win, but his promises already have them costing millions of dollars in federal COVID-19 relief funding.

Justice said higher vaccination rates will save the state money in the long run because it will cut down on hospitalization rates and testing costs. He also said higher rates will save lives. Scott Lincicome, a senior fellow in economic studies at the libertarian-focused Cato Institute, tends to agree with him.

"There's clearly a good chunk of people that need a push," Lincicome told The Center Square.

A higher vaccinated public, Lincicome said, will have greater economic benefits than the costs associated with the incentives. When more people receive the vaccine, the state will not need economic restrictions to keep cases down and more people will be willing to participate in the economy, he said. A lot of people still are afraid to live their lives the way they did before the pandemic, he said.

Ohio has created similar incentives to get people vaccinated, and vaccination rates have since increased, Lincicome said, noting if you're going to be spending taxpayer money, this is one of the better ways to do it.

Not everyone held as much of an optimistic view of the programs. Amanda Kieffer, the communications director for the Cardinal Institute, told The Center Square the money could be used better.

"If Governor Justice and state health officials are truly concerned with public health, a better use of state funds would be to focus on educating young people about the benefits of the vaccine for their age set and to assuage fears and concerns surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine," Kieffer said.

Adrian Moore, the vice president of policy at the Reason Foundation, also had a pessimistic view of the incentives. In an interview with The Center Square, he said no one knows how many people will actually sign up to get the vaccine because of the incentives and whether the benefits will outweigh the costs.

If 1 million more people get vaccinated for every \$1 million spent, the benefits would be very different than if 100 more people get vaccinated for every \$1 million, Moore said. Large prizes and monetary incentives, he said, should be a last resort and not something the state should even consider unless other efforts already have been exhausted.

The governor, Moore said, is "rolling the dice" and gambling with taxpayer money. He said it's an easy decision for the state government because they're using federal funds that will not affect their state budget, but that taxpayers eventually will have to foot the bill for the costs.

Governments don't do this with other health concerns, Moore said, but now "it's different because it's a hot, hot topic." Rather than creating incentives, he said the state should focus on increasing access to the vaccine and messaging about the positives of receiving it.

Justice is set to announce more about the incentive program Tuesday