

THE BUZZ ON FLORIDA POLITICS

So far, few coronavirus vaccines — or answers — for Florida seniors

Gov. Ron DeSantis and others have hailed vaccines as rays of hope in the pandemic. But so far, rollout of the drugs has been marked by confusion and inconsistencies.



Patient Lagretta Lenker receives her first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine from nurse Mary Ellen Chacon on Dec. 30, 2020. Tampa General Medical Group, of the physician practices of Tampa General Hospital, begins administering the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine to patients, ages 65 and over and those with severe co-morbid conditions making them more vulnerable to COVID-19. [DANIEL WALLACE | TAMPA GENERAL HOSPITAL | Daniel Wallace | Tampa General Hospital]

By Allison Ross and Megan Reeves

Published Dec. 30, 2020

Updated Dec. 31, 2020

Anne Kevlin just wants someone to tell her what is going on.

Since Gov. Ron DeSantis made the surprise announcement last week that Floridians 65 and older could get vaccinated for COVID-19 as early as this past Monday, Kevlin has scoured for any details so she could sign up her 79-year-old mom and 89-year-old dad.

But she said she still had no idea where and when the vaccine would be made available.

“There’s this void of information,” said Kevlin, a 55-year-old attorney who lives in St. Petersburg. “I’m continuing to check other counties to see if I can get an appointment for them but they’re all booked up. There’s absolutely no information I can find about Pinellas.”

The rollout of COVID-19 vaccines to Floridians had been hailed as the pandemic’s silver bullet, the one cure for a virus that on Wednesday registered nearly 14,000

additional statewide cases, the highest daily toll in five months. In a mid-November public relations blitz, DeSantis touted the vaccines as the state's "greatest rays of hope."

But since its debut more than two weeks ago, the rollout has been marred by confusion and inconsistencies, hobbling the state's patchwork health system as it launches the most massive public safety effort in its history.

DeSantis has noted that it's not easy to vaccinate 21 million residents quickly or orderly. But neither he nor his office have answered basic questions asked by Floridians and media outlets seeking details on the early stages of vaccine distribution. The state has disclosed an October draft of its vaccination plan but officials have not responded to requests for an update. Other states — Pennsylvania, for example — have published a December version of their vaccination plans online.

Hospitals and county health departments have scrambled to prioritize who gets the limited vaccines available and to create ways to distribute the drugs.

Florida will close out 2020 having received about 965,000 first doses of COVID-19 vaccines, according to allocation data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That's short of the 1 to 2 million doses DeSantis in November had told Floridians to expect by mid-December, although later estimates that he's provided have been more on target. The state is also set to get another 250,000 doses in the first week of the new year, according to the CDC databases.

As of Wednesday, state data showed only about 175,500 Floridians had received first doses of vaccines — less than 1 percent of the population.

“The vaccine is great,” said state Rep. Omari Hardy, a Palm Beach County Democrat. “But if we can’t get it into people’s arms because we don’t have a plan to distribute the vaccine throughout the state and make sure it gets into people’s arms, then ... our incompetence is mitigating the hard work done to develop this vaccine and get it approved in record time.”

DeSantis had followed Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance in prioritizing frontline health care workers and residents and staff of long-term care facilities to be the first to receive the limited doses. But he then made Florida one of the few states to part with federal recommendations by prioritizing senior citizens in the general population ahead of essential workers like teachers, first responders and grocery store employees.

DeSantis is portraying his plan to vaccinate seniors 65 and up as a national success. He said Wednesday that Florida is the first state in the nation to mobilize county health departments to vaccinate seniors in the community, and said it was first in the nation to inoculate employees and residents of long-term care facilities. Yet West Virginia began inoculating its nursing home residents a day before Florida, according to the Associated Press; the governor's office did not provide details on where it got its information.

In Lee County, senior citizens have waited outside for hours this week, some overnight, to get vaccinated on a first-come, first-served basis. In other parts of the state, people trying to sign up for vaccine appointments sometimes have been met with busy signals or overloaded websites. Broward Health stopped taking appointments

after it said it had reached capacity through February for vaccinations, according to the [*Sun-Sentinel*](#).

Meanwhile, other county health departments, including Hillsborough, Pinellas, Hernando and Pasco, did not immediately receive doses earmarked for senior citizens in the general population earlier this week, leaving residents in those areas wondering when they would have access and why they weren't getting more information.

DeSantis announced late Tuesday night that all county health departments that have not yet gotten doses would have them by the end of the week. But the doses appear to still be extremely limited, and DeSantis pleaded with people to have patience.

Even as attention turns to older residents in the general population getting shots, many health care workers and residents and staff of long-term care facilities are still waiting for theirs.

Pinellas County nursing homes were among the first in the state to start receiving vaccinations as part of a pilot program through the county health department. About

6,700 residents and staff of 68 nursing homes in the county were able to get first doses within a matter of days of the state receiving its first shipment of vaccines.

But assisted living facilities in the county are still waiting.

The vaccination scheduling process has been confusing and not as fast as assisted-living facilities had hoped, given that long-term care facilities were supposed to be prioritized, said Sandi Poreda, spokeswoman for Grand Villa Senior Living, which owns assisted-living facilities in Pasco and Pinellas counties.

The facilities had expected to get access in December, Poreda said. Finally, on Tuesday, the company's 18 senior living communities received emails that vaccinations would be administered in January, Poreda said, although

she added that no definitive dates have yet been set for her facilities to get vaccines.

County vaccination totals show an uneven rollout across the state, with roughly 2.5 percent of the population of Alachua County getting a vaccine, while only one person in Glades County was reported to have been vaccinated as of Wednesday.

DeSantis on Tuesday announced that a new batch of Moderna vaccines arriving this week would be directed in part to 54 hospitals throughout the state that had not yet received any doses in a continuing effort to get shots to frontline workers and others.

Yet even as shipments arrive, hospitals have raised questions about what support and guidance they'll get from the state as they play a key role in vaccine distribution. During a call with Florida Surgeon General Scott Rivkees Tuesday, hospital officials asked for clarification on the state's plan but did not always get answers, according to a report by the *News Service of Florida*.

Tampa General, the region's largest hospital, started Wednesday administering vaccines to some patients 65 and older who receive care through Tampa General Medical Group, the hospital's primary and specialty care network. Other hospital systems offering primary care in the area, including BayCare Health System, AdventHealth and HCA Healthcare, said there were no plans in place to begin vaccinating patients.

Some hospitals have opted to offer vaccines to virtually any hospital employee working in their building, or even spouses of employees. Others have not.

Florida should have an advantage in that local county health departments are all technically part of one large system, the Florida Department of Health, said Marissa Levine, director of the Center for Leadership in Public Health Practice at the University of South Florida.

Instead, she said, the public health departments are all doing something different, and seem to have been left to "figure this out on their own with not necessarily a lot of guidance" from the state.

Levine said while she does not think that anyone in public health is surprised by the rocky start — “it has been obvious to people in public health all along that we don’t have the infrastructure” — the thing that has been glaringly missing is communication.

“It has been extremely quiet, and people are clamoring for information,” she said.

The logistics of distributing vaccines becomes more complicated as they get administered to the general population, said Jen Kates, a senior vice president at the Kaiser Family Foundation. Distribution also is more difficult now because of the scarcity of available doses, she said.

Kates stressed that the country is early in the vaccine distribution process and it’s too early to make sweeping judgment calls of how different states are handling things. She said other states also are seeing confusing starts to their rollouts.

One major problem all states are experiencing, Kates said, is the lack of funding to handle a major distribution like this.

“Public health at the state and local level has been underfunded for years. Then COVID hit,” Kates said. She noted that the latest coronavirus stimulus bill does include \$8.75 billion for vaccine distribution, much of which is slated to go to state and local jurisdictions.

Florida State University professor Leslie Beitsch, a former Oklahoma commissioner of health and former deputy secretary for the Florida Department of Health, said that while state and local officials must “do better” with vaccine rollout and communications, the public must also have patience.

In the meantime, he said, it’s important that people not let their guard down and continue with masking and social distancing so as not to spread the virus and further tax an already overburdened health system.

On Wednesday, the health departments in Pinellas and [Hillsborough counties](#) said they plan to begin allowing people 65 and older to begin making appointments for vaccines beginning in January, with Pinellas saying vaccines would be available next Tuesday while Hillsborough could only say early January. [Hernando County](#) said it will be able to begin offering the vaccine starting Jan. 4 to people 65 and older who make an appointment. Each of the health departments warned that supplies will be limited and none said how many doses would be available.

Pasco's health department said it would begin offering vaccines to seniors Thursday by appointment only. As of Wednesday afternoon, all the appointment slots were already filled.