

# Herald-Tribune

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## POLITICS

# Yacht clubs, golf courses, gated communities: Florida's pop-up vaccine clinics raise ethical concerns

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When Florida threw open the door for seniors to get COVID-19 vaccines, hundreds camped out overnight, some bundled up in lawn chairs in the January cold to score a shot.

Thousands more waited in digital lines for their number to come up in county-run vaccine pools.

But for some lucky Floridians, getting a vaccine was as easy as hopping in their golf carts and rolling down to the clubhouse.

Pop-up clinics offering exclusive vaccine access sprouted at country clubs and a long list of golf course communities stretching from Delray Beach to Lakeland and Ocala. Special clinics also dotted the west coast, from the Tampa exurbs to Naples, where shots were given at a clubhouse in a community with two private beaches and homes that have sold for more than \$14 million. A pair of yacht clubs in Martin County and the Florida Keys even secured special vaccine access.

Florida has drawn national scorn and questions about favoritism for a handful of these vaccine pop-ups in upscale communities, yet many more housing developments received exclusive clinics than is widely understood.

A USA TODAY Network analysis of state and local government records, news reports and information from private developers found at least 150 communities that landed vaccine pop-ups or priority access to doses. Data provided by the state is incomplete so there likely are many more.

Gov. Ron DeSantis and others stand accused of allowing residents of upscale communities to cut in line. The governor was personally involved in coordinating two pop-up clinics in

Manatee and Charlotte counties in communities developed by his donors, while other clinics were held in developments where donors had shelled out big contributions to the governor.

Beyond political favoritism concerns, the pop-up clinics raise questions about how state and local officials made decisions about where to dole out the vaccine. It's often unclear how certain communities were chosen, and whether organization, persistence or connections – typically traits of wealthier communities – trumped public health strategy.

Community leaders at a number of developments that received state-run private vaccine clinics said there was no formal application process; they simply were aggressive in lobbying state and local government officials, and it paid off.

“We just started emailing everybody,” said Lyn Reitz, association manager of Sun City Center, a sprawling Hillsborough County community with 11,500 residents and multiple golf courses where more than 4,000 people were vaccinated at a pop-up. DeSantis held a news conference to kick off that clinic in January.

DeSantis has denied that the wealthy, including his donors, are getting preferential access and says he's directing doses to counties with the highest senior populations. Yet a USA TODAY Network data analysis revealed last week that seniors in wealthier counties were getting significantly more doses through the end of February, and those counties are only slightly older.

**Analysis:** When COVID-19 vaccines were most scarce, seniors in Florida's wealthiest counties got them at higher rates

**More:** Your COVID vaccine comparison by county: See Florida vaccination rates from richest to poorest

Florida also stands out nationally in favoring seniors in wealthier counties. Compared to states with similar data, Florida shows the strongest correlation between median income and vaccinations of people 65 and up. And only 6.4% of Florida's vaccines have gone to African Americans, even though they make up 17% of the population.

Public health experts say pop-up clinics can be a useful tool for reaching populations with barriers to getting the shot, such as the poor, minorities and those with limited computer access or transportation. Many of Florida's clinics were in moderate or lower-priced senior communities, including public housing, mobile home parks, senior condominiums and apartment complexes.

Yet even some of these less affluent communities have significant political clout because of their sheer size or other factors, such as belonging to trade associations that gave big campaign contributions to the governor. And the simple fact that certain communities were allowed to cut in line early on, when vaccine supply was extremely limited, has rankled many Floridians.

“It just smacks of favoritism,” said Ross Edlund, 69, who drove nearly two hours to Miami from his home near Naples to get the shot while his neighbors at an upscale community across the street received their own private vaccine pop-up clinic.

## **Early push for exclusive clinics**

Florida’s vaccination effort was barely two weeks old when DeSantis took the stage at the Kings Point Golf & Country Club in Delray Beach on Dec. 30 and declared that “we have a responsibility to stand by those folks who’ve done so much to make our state and country what it is today.”

DeSantis had traveled to the gated 55-and-older community in Palm Beach County to kick off a vaccine pop-up. On stage with him were three seniors who received the vaccine on the spot. A total of 300 Kings Point residents received special access to the lifesaving shots that day.

Florida’s vaccine strategy has been controversial from the start, with DeSantis bucking federal recommendations and moving quickly to make the vaccine available to all seniors.

The state received its first doses on Dec. 14, and nine days later DeSantis issued an executive order allowing anyone 65 and older to get vaccinated, touching off a scramble by state and local government officials.

Florida Department of Health officials worked with local governments to set up large vaccination sites at parks, malls, fairgrounds and stadiums, accessed through online registration systems. Along with pharmacies and health care facilities, these large vaccination sites became the primary distribution points in many Florida communities.

Even before many of these sites were up and running, however, state and local officials began launching more targeted efforts: PODs, short for point of dispensing. These pop-up clinics were staged at churches, community centers and other locations. Those at housing developments often were limited to residents, allowing them to avoid the waiting game at the big vaccination hubs.

Getting a full accounting of all the pop-up clinics at Florida housing communities is a lesson in frustration.

The USA TODAY Network requested data from the governor's office, the state Division of Emergency Management and the Florida Department of Health, which coordinate vaccination distribution, on PODs at senior housing communities. The list they provided includes just 22 clinics at housing developments, a fraction of what has occurred.

Some clinics have been coordinated by local governments. Yet state officials also didn't list many of the clinics coordinated by county health departments, even though they are state agencies under the Florida Department of Health.

Records requests were sent to health departments and county governments in many of the largest counties. Most directed inquiries to the main DOH office, did not respond or said they had few or no such clinics at housing developments. A records request sent to the main DOH office for an updated list of all PODs has yet to be fulfilled.

Two agencies that did provide data on clinics in Pasco and Hillsborough counties reported dozens of clinics in each county.

DeSantis has touted the pop-ups as an effective way to reach large numbers of seniors.

During a news conference at a clinic in Lakewood Ranch in Southwest Florida on Feb. 17, DeSantis said the goal was getting "the numbers up for seniors, so the logical thing was to go to where there's a high concentration of seniors."

### **Pop-up clinics on Florida's West Coast**

- ▶ Vaccine clinics in Lakewood Ranch and Charlotte draw complaints of political favoritism
- ▶ Florida COVID vaccine organizers discussed how upscale clinic could benefit Gov. Ron DeSantis
- ▶ Sarasota County community with million-dollar homes got special vaccine access
- ▶ DeSantis defends vaccine clinic accused of favoritism, threatens to send vaccines elsewhere after complaints

Boosting senior vaccination rates did not require giving some communities exclusive access, though. State and local officials could have expanded the large vaccination sites to handle more people or staged pop-up clinics that drew from public waitlists, rather than favoring

certain communities. In some cases that's exactly what the state did, staging a pop-up clinic at the Venice Community Center, for example, that drew from Sarasota County's wait list.

Many other clinics offered special access, however, and many of the communities that received those state-run clinics are influential political powerhouses where candidates often stump during election time because of their big populations of high-propensity older voters.

The list of communities that received pop-ups includes some of the largest and best-known 55-and-older developments in the state, from Sun City Center in the Tampa area to On Top of the World in north Central Florida and Solivita between Lakeland and Orlando. Nine pop-ups were held at large senior housing complexes in South Florida, three of them in Palm Beach County and six in Broward County. Florida Division of Emergency Management Director Jared Moskowitz is from Broward County and so is the governor's former chief of staff, Shane Strum.

From the beginning, the private vaccine clinics served as popular locations for DeSantis to hold news conferences and tout his vaccine efforts.

On Jan. 27, DeSantis kicked off the clinic at Sun City Center. On Feb. 11, he spoke at a pop-up at Kings Gate, a 55-and-older community in Southwest Florida.

Some earlier vaccination efforts in gated communities had received local media scrutiny, but it was not until Feb. 17, as DeSantis prepared to hold a news conference at the Lakewood Ranch clinic, that widespread outcry about pop-ups erupted, sparking weeks of debate about vaccine favoritism.

## **Favoritism complaints**

DeSantis has rejected the criticism that he was playing politics with vaccines as a false narrative driven by the "corporate media" and his political opponents. Yet among the early critics were Republican allies of the governor on the Manatee County Commission, responding to community outrage about the Lakewood Ranch clinic.

Rex Jensen, the president and CEO of Lakewood Ranch developer Schroeder-Manatee Ranch, spoke directly with DeSantis about hosting a clinic, text messages show. Jensen contacted Manatee County Commission Chair Vanessa Baugh for help arranging the event.

Manatee County has a vaccine lottery system that distributes doses randomly to people who pre-register. The Lakewood Ranch pop-up restricted the lottery there to people who live in two wealthy ZIP codes.

On Feb. 16 and again on Feb. 18, Republican county commissioners grilled Baugh about the clinic, complaining that it favored privileged communities.

“What happened over the last few days undermines everything I’ve been telling my residents,” Commissioner Kevin Van Ostenbridge said. “Favoritism was shown and that erodes people’s trust in their government.”

Schroeder-Manatee Ranch also donated \$2,000 to DeSantis during his 2018 campaign, fueling criticism from the public and some prominent Democrats that DeSantis was awarding vaccine clinics to his donors.

The “insinuation” that pop-up clinics “are established for political purposes is completely baseless,” DeSantis spokeswoman Meredith Beatrice said in February. The governor’s office did not respond to questions for this article.

Another DeSantis donor who received a clinic is developer Pat Neal, who said in a press release that the governor “reached out to ask for assistance” in coordinating a vaccination event. Neal served on DeSantis’ transition team and contributed \$125,000 to his political committee. He is a former state senator who has long been active in Republican politics and is a leading fundraiser for GOP campaigns.

Neal staged the clinic at Kings Gate, a Southwest Florida community where Neal builds homes. The Sarasota Herald-Tribune revealed that Neal’s company also invited residents of other communities to participate in the Charlotte County clinic, including two upscale Sarasota County communities that Neal is developing: the Boca Royale Golf & Country Club in Englewood and the Grand Palm development in Venice.

Boca Royale has homes valued at more than \$1 million. Grand Palm has homes approaching that price level. The development also has a large water slide and a children’s splash pad.

## **Yacht clubs and private beaches**

While the governor has directly tapped developers of upscale communities to host some vaccine clinics, wealthy enclaves also have obtained special access to doses through other means.

Health care companies and local officials have facilitated clinics in luxury communities with large DeSantis donors.

In one case, the governor pointed to a hospital system in South Florida as responsible for a vaccination event at a wealthy yacht club in the Florida Keys that is home to a major DeSantis donor. A private health care company also was involved in a vaccination event at a yacht club in Martin County.

Piper's Landing Yacht & Country Club near Stuart in Martin County was able to get 270 of its residents, more than half, vaccinated on Jan. 7, according to TCPalm.com. A pair of homes currently are for sale in Piper's Landing for more than \$1 million, including a 5,300-square-foot, \$1.4 million house overlooking the St. Lucie River with a private sauna and a boat lift that can accommodate a 40-foot vessel.

The Yacht Club residents received their doses because the local health department diverted some of its weekly allotment to private health care companies, including Mobile Medical, whose owner told TCPalm.com that the clinic was staged at the yacht club because 70 residents are Mobile Medical patients. The other 200 yacht club members who received leftover shots were just lucky, the community's general manager said.

Around the same time that Piper's Landing residents were getting special vaccine access, so were residents of the Ocean Reef Club in the Keys.

According to the Miami Herald, a newsletter sent on Jan. 22 to Ocean Reef Club residents reported that more than 1,200 of them had been vaccinated. A home currently under construction in the club's Sunrise Cay neighborhood is listed at \$19.9 million.

Seventeen Ocean Reef Club residents gave \$5,000 to DeSantis. Bruce Rauner, a resident and former Republican governor of Illinois, also cut a \$250,000 check to the governor's political committee shortly after the club's residents were vaccinated, according to state records.

**More to the story:** Naples' upscale Pelican Bay community gets private COVID-19 vaccine clinic

**'One lucky community':** How a Palm City yacht and country club vaccinated half its residents

DeSantis said during a press conference that the state was not involved in getting the vaccine doses to Ocean Reef, but the hospital that distributed the doses disputed that. A Baptist Health spokeswoman said Ocean Reef's medical center asked the state for the doses, and state officials sent them to Baptist Health with instructions to pass them along, according to the Herald.

Another upscale community that received special vaccine access is Pelican Bay in Naples, a 6,500-home development with two private beaches and a private tram system with eight stops. Homes in the community's most exclusive beachfront neighborhood have sold for \$14.9 million, \$16.4 million and \$24.5 million.

Pelican Bay is home to more than two dozen DeSantis donors, including one who gave \$25,000.

On Feb. 26, Pelican Bay hosted a private vaccine clinic for 400 community residents, the first pop-up in a housing development in Collier County. It has since hosted several more clinics, giving out 400 shots each time.

Members of the community say they didn't ask for the vaccine clinic, though. Instead, they said the North Collier Fire Control & Rescue District, which covers Pelican Bay, initiated the effort, something the fire district's deputy chief confirmed, according to the Naples Daily News and The News-Press.

A common refrain from those hosting the state-run clinics is that there hasn't been a formal process to request them, leaving plenty of room for the perception that political influence played a role in who was selected.

## **Vaccine chaos**

The process of securing a state-run vaccine pop-up clinic remains something of a mystery in Florida. Even community leaders who landed clinics aren't quite sure how they did it.

Among the communities that received a state clinic is the sprawling Solivita development near Orlando, which has 9,000 residents and 14 swimming pools.

Solivita Club Manager Sheri Wollschlager said there was no formal application process. Instead, she and others in the community contacted everyone they could think of, including the governor's office and Polk County commissioners.

Wollschlager said she has no idea how Solivita was selected for a clinic.

"We have a lot of residents who have time on their hands," she said. "I'm sure they were emailing the governor. I personally emailed the governor."

Other community managers told similar stories.

“We have a lot of contacts around the county and the state, and we just started emailing everybody,” said Reitz, the Sun City Center Association manager. Reitz assumes one of the emails “just got to the right channel.”

Asked if the state has a formal process for requesting a vaccine pop-up clinic, Florida Division of Emergency Management spokesman Jason Mahon said: “As with any emergency, all counties have the ability to request support from the state. The activation of PODs can come through county emergency management, county health departments, or are sometimes made directly by the state health office or Division of Emergency Management.”

As for the criteria the state uses to select locations, Mahon said there are multiple variables.

“These variables include identifying areas where there are a large number of people who are eligible to be vaccinated, and the amount of available vaccine on hand,” Mahon said.

“The state would welcome the opportunity to go directly to every senior community in Florida, every faith-based organization in Florida, and every community center where people gather to provide the vaccine,” he said.

“Unfortunately, we still have a limited amount of supply. That is why the state has used a multi-pronged approach, including working with partners in the private sector, setting up large, state-supported vaccination sites, and providing the vaccine directly at senior communities and in conjunction with the faith-based community.”

Some places did have an application process. Pelican Bay Property Owners Association board member Donna Raab said an employee with the Florida Department of Health’s Collier County office took pop-up applications during a meeting of Collier homeowners associations in February.

Although Pelican Bay was the first in the county to get a pop-up, Raab noted that other communities soon followed.

“We were given no special treatment,” she said.

Raab described Florida’s vaccine distribution effort as very random.

“They had no plan,” she said. “It was very unorganized ... they ran around putting out fires.”

In the absence of a state plan for vaccine distribution, something DeSantis has shrugged off by noting other states quickly had to change their plans, those seeking pop-ups appealed to whomever they could. A number of communities leaned on their political connections.

“We did go to our county commissioner,” said Mark Bufano, operations manager for the Groves Golf and Country Club in Pasco County. “One of our board members knew him.”

Shortly after calling the commissioner, the Groves was notified it would receive a state-run pop-up starting on Jan. 13, Bufano said. That clinic distributed 800 doses.

“All of a sudden we got a phone call, so I’ll give him all the credit in the world,” Bufano said of the county commissioner.

A news release sent out by On Top of the World, the 55-plus community in North Central Florida, credited two state lawmakers with helping arrange the vaccine clinic there.

“As a result of reaching out to Rep. Joe Harding and Senator Dennis Baxley, On Top of the World Communities was contacted by a State Emergency Management representative who set up logistics through their Region 3 Tactical Branch,” the news release states.

The governor has continued to embrace pop-ups at housing developments, despite intense criticism over the Lakewood Ranch clinic and ongoing questions about whether political connections and campaign contributions are playing a role. On March 5, he held a news conference at On Top of the World to kick off the vaccine clinic there.

Recently the state has staged clinics at more modestly priced housing communities, including some mobile home parks. Yet even these communities hold political sway. The Florida Manufactured Housing Association political action committee contributed \$125,000 to the governor’s political committee.

Local officials that followed the state’s lead also conducted pop-ups in housing communities ranging from senior apartment complexes in Tampa to country club communities in Polk, Pasco and Collier counties.

Instead of evening out the playing field, some of these clinics may have contributed to a disparity in who has been vaccinated in Florida.

As of the end of February, residents age 65 and older in the top third of counties ranked by median income had been vaccinated at a rate more than 4 percentage points higher than seniors in the rest of the state, the USA TODAY Network data analysis showed. That equates to about 290,000 more vaccine doses delivered to wealthier seniors.

## Seeking equity through pop-up clinics

Exclusive vaccine clinics that benefit already privileged groups can erode public trust, especially when supplies are scarce. Some public health experts say pop-up clinics can be good for reaching the underserved, though.

“These pop-up clinics may be a good strategy, depending on where you place them,” said Dr. Jorge Salinas, a hospital epidemiologist and clinical assistant professor of internal medicine at the University of Iowa who specializes in infectious diseases.

Salinas said the clinics should target those most in need.

“If we are going to go out of our way to vaccinate special groups, it should be those who experience more barriers to care,” he said.

Hillsborough County in the Tampa Bay region has targeted senior apartment complexes, many of them public housing or in low-income neighborhoods.

Jay Rajyaguru, an emergency management coordinator with Hillsborough County Fire Rescue, said his team uses the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Social Vulnerability Index, which ranks communities based on income level and factors such as access to transportation.

“Our goal is to target those low-income and other socially vulnerable people,” he said.

**Equal access?:** Sarasota County advocates want better COVID-19 vaccine equity

Progress is slow, though. Hillsborough only has vaccinated 9.3% of its Black population, while statewide 10.9% of Black residents have been vaccinated.

Mike Napier, who runs the DOH office in Pasco County north of Tampa, said he was under pressure to get vaccines out quickly and saw pop-ups in housing developments as a way to do that, including in golf club and country club communities.

“I know there was some question about why are you going into gated communities versus non-gated communities,” Napier said. “Initially ... it was a matter of who was ready.”

He said his office already had arrangements with some communities to do vaccine clinics in the event of emergencies, such as anthrax exposure. Many were higher-income communities, partly because they’re more proactive, Napier said.

In retrospect, Napier said, he wished he had had more pre-existing arrangements with lower-income communities, and that's something he plans to work on.

"We are aware there needs to be a little hand-holding to help the communities that aren't as engaged," he said.

Pasco did end up getting to many lower income communities, though, including RV parks and mobile home parks, and its 10.5% vaccination rate for Black residents is not much below the state rate.

Other counties had few or no pop-ups at housing developments. Lee County in Southwest Florida had just one, in a public housing development. It was requested by the local chapter of the NAACP.

The vaccination rate has been lower among minority groups in Florida, as across the nation.

DeSantis and state health officials have stepped up their efforts to vaccinate minorities after media reporting on their low vaccination numbers, staging dozens of pop-up clinics at churches, including Black churches, and other locations to draw in minorities.

Experts directly attribute the statewide racial disparities in vaccine distribution, in part, to the pop-up clinics in gated communities, which tend to be whiter, more wealthy and able to get shots without needing the government to bring it to them.

"This undermines trust in government," said Dr. Leslie Beitsch, a professor in the department of **Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine Center** at Florida State University. "It suggests resources are always there and allocated to those with close relationships to important people. And that suggests without those relationships, in a pinch, you're going to be left out in the cold. ... The overall pattern is eye-popping."

Beitsch and other experts say these pop-up clinics can cast doubts about equity, especially when information about them is kept opaque – and there are questions about the politics involved.

"The problem with pop-up clinics is that it gives the perception of favoritism," said Dr. Marissa Levine, a professor of public health and family medicine at the University of South Florida who leads the school's Center for Leadership in Public Health Practice.

Levine said what happened in Florida is the perfect example of why states need to create a transparent framework for vaccine distribution to ensure the public has trust in the system and those involved in vaccine distribution are on the same page.

“There’s a significant ethical concern here,” Levine said. “How are you going to ensure even distribution when you can’t possibly provide access to everybody? It really falls to the states, and they should make these decisions transparently.”

*Contributing to this report were Sara Walsh of the Lakeland Ledger, Max Chesnes of TCPalm, and Dan DeLuca, Liz Freeman and Frank Gluck of the Naples Daily News and The News-Press. Yoonserk Pyun, Aleszu Bajak, Janie Haseman and Jeffrey Schweers of the USA TODAY Network also contributed.*

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