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Vaccination clinic held in Newtown as Sarasota develops new appointment system

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On a day when 400 people stood in the cold and rain in Newtown to get vaccinated for COVID-19, Sarasota County officials outlined their plans to improve how and when the vaccine will be distributed.

The events were held hours and miles apart from one another Wednesday, but it was clear that both those administering and those receiving the vaccine agree things need to change.

“I’ve been trying ever since they said Sarasota was doing it,” said Helen McBean. “And it’s a crappy system they use with Eventbrite.”

Sarasota has been using the online system Eventbrite since it began offering the vaccine, but the program has been beset by problems.

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The process has also been criticized because residents without access to a computer or the internet have no way to access the vaccine.

Chuck Henry, health officer for the Florida Department of Health in Sarasota County, told county commissioners Wednesday morning that the state is working on several pilot reservation systems that are supposed to be ready soon. The project, he said, has been delayed because of technical difficulties.

Henry said that locally the county is looking at using Everbridge, which is already used for emergency response.

That system would allow residents to use the phone or a computer to register. People are then placed in an “electronic line” and when vaccines come in, those in line can be pulled

from the top of the list.

More: Limited COVID-19 vaccine supplies arrive in Sarasota-Manatee, a surprise to local officials

The county has already completed a pilot of the program and the department hopes to launch it this week or early next week.

If all goes well, the health department hopes to switch from Eventbrite, and use the new system throughout the vaccine rollout, Henry said.

He hopes that the new system will give the health department the flexibility to target specific areas of the county in order to better distribute the vaccine.

“It will be some time before we get to that point,” Henry said. “I hope the system will allow me to see how many people are in line for the vaccine from certain areas.”

The 400 people who attended the event Wednesday afternoon were lucky enough to completely circumvent the county’s appointment system.

More: Manatee scheduling vaccinations for Thursday as Feds promise more vaccines for more people

The event was put on by Sarasota Memorial Hospital and held at its Internal Medicine clinic in Newtown.

Kim Savage, a spokeswoman for Sarasota Memorial, said the hospital purposely avoided using the county’s system. Instead, the clinic contacted its patients 65 and older who said they wanted the vaccine and then reached out to local community organizations and churches to help fill the spots.

One major reason the hospital bypassed the county system was that they wanted this event to reach more people of color, Savage said.

Getting people of color vaccinated is critical to curbing the spread of COVID-19, officials said, because their communities have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. But making sure they have access to the vaccine can sometimes be difficult.

More: Sarasota-Manatee hospitals differ on how to handle the COVID-19 vaccine

A statewide task force working to fast track access to the vaccine in minority communities unveiled a plan Wednesday designating a minimum of 40 vaccination venues in the

northwest, northeast, southwest and southeast parts of the state by Jan. 31, according to the Tallahassee Democrat.

Ultimately, the Statewide Coronavirus Vaccination Community Education and Engagement Task Force wants to get 60-70% of communities of color vaccinated by the end of 2021.

The Democrat reported that the task force wants to partner with the Florida Department of Health to establish vaccine sites at Black churches, community centers and at Florida's four historically Black colleges and universities.

The task force also is partnering with the Florida Hospital Association to get hospitals throughout the state to share their vaccine supplies at churches and other sites in Black communities, the paper reported.

But the challenge is more than a logistical one, especially when it comes to the Black community, said Washington Hill, a physician at Sarasota Memorial who helped organize the Newtown vaccination.

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He says many in the community are leery of vaccines based on issues the community has dealt with in the past. The problem, he said, is that there is a mistrust of government and hospitals, and that people worry that they're being lied to and that the process to produce the vaccine was too quick.

"It's the perception. Trust. History," Hill said. "They may not know what happened at Tuskegee, but they know it wasn't right."

The Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male was a human experiment in the 1930s conducted on 600 black men to study how syphilis ravaged the body.

Hill said that it is now up to community leaders to help dispel the myths and encourage residents to sign up and get the vaccine.

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Fredd Atkins, Sarasota's first Black commissioner, agreed that spreading the word within the Black community is critical to fighting COVID, especially since it has been hit hard by it.

According to Johns Hopkins University, Black people make up about 13% of the population, but account for about 34% of total COVID deaths in states that report racial data.

Atkins, whose mother died from COVID in May, says the main reason for this is that people of color often have the types of jobs that take them out of the house and into harm's way, and that they face economic pressures that make staying home unsustainable.

“The risk is higher and we have to expect the reward is even greater. We have to believe it is in our best interest to defend ourselves like we did in other situations,” he said.

“We’ve been taking vaccinations that we don’t know how they came to be and benefited from them. I hope we won’t be so willing to sacrifice the lives of others with our hesitancy to take the shot.”

Vaccine doses slow to arrive

In other vaccine news, Henry said the department of health has received 5,900 doses to date – 3,500 doses the first week, 1,400 doses the next and 1,000 doses this week.

He expects all doses to be gone by the end of the week.

Henry also said the department has not moved to a drive-thru setting yet because he felt there wasn't enough vaccine to put those resources into the field.

Henry said he thought the department might do that in the second week, but allocations were too low to implement it.

The drive-thru system is preferred because it limits the risk of exposure to staff and patients, Henry said. The challenge is holding people for 15 minutes after the vaccine. Mobility issues and transportation issues are another concern.

According to the state, as of Wednesday Sarasota has vaccinated 18,793 and Manatee County 12,020. This includes hospitals, CVS, and the departments of health.

“We’re all pushing out the vaccine as soon as we receive it and ending up at the end of the week with zero,” he said.