

Are ‘vaccine tourists’ taking our local doses?

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So here’s the thing: Once you get past the jammed phone lines and crashed websites, the frustration and the certainty SOMEONE is screwing up this vaccine distribution — the process of actually getting the COVID-19 shot is smooth.

“It’s really well organized,” said Kathy Orloff, 72, of the drive-through vaccine clinic staged by the Florida Department of Health in Martin County Thursday morning. Vehicles made their way through the winding gantlet, dropping off paperwork here, getting the vaccine there, then waiting the requisite 15 minutes before they could leave, in case there are any side effects.

But what an effort it took for Orloff, of Hobe Sound, to get a place in line. “We had six people calling” from the moment the phone lines opened, she said. Finally, one got through and was able to book the appointment. “Congratulations,” I told her. Which is weird — congratulations on getting a shot?

But securing an appointment is like finding a golden ticket to Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory. It shouldn’t be that way. But it probably will be for some time.

It’s a demand thing, mostly. Understand, there are just under 51,000 Martin County residents over age 65, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. As of Thursday, 7,414 had been vaccinated (out of a total of 10,029 county residents who’d gotten the shot).

In St. Lucie County, of the 15,348 people vaccinated, 10,944 were seniors. The Census Bureau estimates just over 81,000 seniors live in the county.

We may be well into the spring before all these folks get their shots. And it’ll be longer still before the shots are available to everyone else.

New distribution sites like Publix will help; but even people booking shots with state-approved private providers aren’t having an easy time.

Steven Weissman of Palm City, 77, got into the Cleveland Clinic “MyChart” system, and last week he got an email: His vaccination has been scheduled!

“I was thrilled until I scrolled down and there it was; my appointment... April 8, 2021,” he said.

Friday morning he hoped to book an earlier appointment with Publix. He “clicked on at exactly 6 a.m. and sure enough by 7:12 (when I scrolled to Martin County) it was fully booked,” he said. “I guess I’ll wait,” he said.

It’s almost comedic, or would be, if COVID-19 weren’t such a mortal threat.

Given the huge number of people chasing the limited number of shots, it made sense for Gov. Ron DeSantis to crack down on “vaccine tourists” this week. As of Jan. 21, anyone getting a shot has to prove they live in Florida.

State figures as of Thursday showed 40,965 people who listed an out-of-state address had gotten shots in the Sunshine State. Some might simply have been snowbirds, listing their address “up north” rather than their local address.

But earlier this month the Wall Street Journal reported travel agencies in Canada

were booking charter flights for people to fly down here and get their shots.

I asked local health officials for a breakdown of how many “vaccine tourists” were inoculated in Martin and St. Lucie counties but they were unable to provide the info by press time. And the main office in Tallahassee never got back to me.

Anecdotally, said Renay Rouse, spokesperson for the health department in Martin County, vaccine tourism hasn’t been a big issue here; in general, people aren’t coming in from out of state for the shot.

But from outside the county? That’s a different story.

News accounts are filled with reports of folks living in one part of Florida driving to another to snag the vaccine. My colleague Larry Reisman visited a Vero Beach vaccine clinic and talked with folks who’d come from Fort Lauderdale, Palm Beach Gardens, Titusville and elsewhere.

There’s nothing in the threadbare state vaccine guidelines/regulations to prohibit this. But should it be allowed?

The vaccines are apportioned on a county-by-county basis; the clear implication is that vaccines distributed to St. Lucie County are intended FOR St. Lucie County. When people from all over the map swoop in and sign up for a shot, that’s one less shot available to those who actually live in the county.

It puts local residents who can’t travel at a competitive disadvantage.

And I’m not sure we should be “competing” for this vaccine, though we are...

For the reality is, even as we increase the number of places where you can get a shot,

even as (hopefully) the supply of shots increases and demand eases as we vaccinate more and more people, our system of distribution creates hurdles for some.

It helps to be computer literate; how many seniors are? If you don’t have transportation or you’re homebound, you might be unable to get to the vaccination sites (although Clint Sperber, health officer for the department of health in St. Lucie County, says the department is working with the Council on Aging to deliver shots to 500 homebound seniors in the coming weeks).

A month into the vaccine distribution, we’re still kind of making it up as we go along.

Here’s hoping the adjustments we make on the fly can turn the vaccine into less of a golden ticket — and more of a sure thing.

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Vaccine pipeline shifts suppliers

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Cleveland Clinic, other hospitals receive less. This is what you call changing vaccinators in mid-stream. Since the COVID-19 vaccine push began, Cleveland Clinic has been a major player, putting more than 19,000 shots into arms around Florida over the past four weeks.

But now Cleveland Clinic — with facilities in all three Treasure Coast counties — is basically out of shots.

"All Cleveland Clinic Florida locations have allocated their vaccine supply and have suspended scheduling eligible individuals," according to a statement on the provider's website. "We are working closely with the state of Florida to receive additional supplies of vaccine as soon as possible."

When might that be? Maybe never.

Because Florida's vaccine game plan has been rewritten.

Vaccines once distributed to Cleveland Clinic and other Florida hospitals are now going elsewhere, mostly to Publix and county health departments.

The idea, apparently, is to decentralize distribution, bring the vaccines closer to where people live. Most Floridians live within a stone's throw of a Publix, after all.

"When the first round of the vaccine was allocated," said Mary Mayhew, CEO of the Florida Hospital Association, "hospitals played an essential role." But now, she said, there's been a "natural progression to expand to communitybased vaccination sites."

But don't worry, she said: If you got your first shot at a hospital, you'll be able to get your second shot there, too.

But if you're looking for that first shot — don't look to the hospitals.

In true Florida fashion, none of this has been publicly articulated — though you've no doubt noticed Gov. Ron De-Santis popping up like a groundhog at Publix supermarkets around the state, including one in Vero Beach Tuesday.

At each stop, he announces the supermarket chain will be making the vaccine available at more of its stores.

Great news! Then people call to make an appointment and get the same old jammed phone lines; appointments fill up in mere hours.

Then, sometimes, they call or email me to say: What the heck? If Publix is now dispensing shots, shouldn't this be easier? Shouldn't there be more shots?

And no — there aren't. Our limited supply has merely been shifted from one distributor (hospitals) to another (Publix).

Call it rearranging the deck chairs on the USS COVID. And nothing's going to change unless we start getting a lot more vaccines to dole out.

"The problem we still have in Florida is that the vaccine supply is just completely inadequate to meet demand," said Mayhew.

“We’re only getting 200,000 to 250,000 doses per week,” she said. “And we’ve got 4.5 million people 65 and older.”

The feds are saying Florida has more doses than we’ve let on. On Monday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Florida has only distributed about half the vaccines it’s been allocated; CDC data shows Florida has gotten 2.9 million doses of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines from the federal government, but distributed only 1.5 million. But DeSantis says most of those are the second doses everyone who gets the first shot needs to receive. And late last week state Surgeon General Dr. Scott Rivkees said Florida remains in a “supply limited situation.”

Meanwhile, some hospitals appear to be scrambling to shift gears, as if the state’s decision to redirect vaccines supplies took them by surprise.

Around Florida, “some hospitals had to cancel first-dose vaccination appointments, and those people will now have to scramble to rebook their appointments at places still getting vaccines,” according to WFTV 9 News in Orlando.

Because apparently people haven’t been scrambling enough when it comes to securing the vaccine.

In a statement, Cleveland Clinic’s Dr. Richard Rothman, who has been leading the COVID operations team for the region, said local hospitals “are continuing to provide second-dose vaccinations to those individuals who have received their first shot from Cleveland Clinic Florida and are due for their second dose.”

“As we receive additional doses, we will be offering first-dose appointments to

individuals in accordance with the governor’s executive order,” Rothman said.

“As” should perhaps be replaced with “If” in that sentence.

Maybe the state’s new strategy is the right one; maybe retail outlets like Publix are better positioned to handle the overwhelming demand. Should we see a significant bump in supply, then the additional points of distribution, particularly in under served communities, may be a huge boon. But should hospitals be excluded altogether?

And the way this is being done can only sow more confusion. Frankly, people don’t know and haven’t been told hospitals are no longer distributing the vaccine. The impression conveyed by all the governor’s Publix pit stops is that the pie is getting bigger.

All we’re doing is slicing it differently.

And any way you slice it — it’s not enough.

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