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U.S.

# Covid-19 Vaccine and Seniors: What It Is Like for Older Adults Getting Their Shots

Many over-65s say the process for getting vaccinated is confusing and the system is overloaded

By [Jim Carlton](#)

Feb. 4, 2021 9:00 am ET



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Americans over age 65 are now eligible for the Covid-19 vaccine in much of the country, according to federal guidance. As they join the health-care workers and first responders who were among the first to get their shots, many are finding a confusing and often overloaded appointments process and scarce doses.

On Long Island, N.Y., some older Americans have had to travel hundreds of miles from home to get an appointment. In Texas, people are signing up on multiple waiting lists of grocery stores, hospitals and public clinics in hopes one pans out. In Nevada, people are being directed from state websites to county websites, and then back to the state.

“I can figure out how to teach calculus,” said Lisa Crosby, an education consultant in Reno, Nev., who has been trying to book appointments for her 78-year-old mom and 81-year-old dad since early January. “But I can’t figure out how to get my parents vaccinated.”

As the Covid-19 vaccine has rolled out around the U.S., about 40% of the doses allocated to states have gone unused so far. As of Monday, 30 states allowed vaccinations in at least some of their counties for anyone over age 65, according to the most recent tally by the nonprofit Kaiser Family Foundation.

Seniors are left struggling to sort it out. Here are some of their stories:

## Persistence Pays Off



“He just hit refresh, refresh, refresh until one popped up.”

—Susan Harvey

PHOTO: JESSICA CHOU FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Susan Harvey, 71, says she has spent most of the pandemic serving as sole caregiver to her 67-year-old husband Bryan Harvey, who suffers from multiple sclerosis and is using a wheelchair.

When Illinois announced in mid-January that people over age 65 could start making vaccine appointments beginning Jan. 25, she got on her computer, but had little luck going through a vaccine portal set up by the Sangamon County Department of Public Health. “You pick a date and they say no vaccinations available,” she said.

After several days of working day and night from his home in New York, Ms. Harvey’s son-in-law was able to get her husband an appointment for Jan. 27. “He just hit refresh, refresh, refresh until one popped up,” she said.

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But for her, the earliest he could find was March 20, she said. Ms. Harvey called the county health office where her husband had a vaccine appointment and asked if, as his caregiver, she could get one with him.

Even though she was told no, Ms. Harvey asked the attendant at a drive-up clinic if she could get a shot too so long as she was there. “The young woman said, sure, just don’t say anything,” Ms. Harvey said, adding she received her shot after her husband’s.

Driving away afterward, Ms. Harvey could barely believe her good luck. “This whole process is like ‘Hunger Games,’ ” she said, referring to the movie. “It’s crazy.”

A spokeswoman for the Sangamon County Department of Public Health didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment.

—*Jim Carlton*

## Unable to Register



Kris Dasgupta tried to book her appointment for a Covid-19 vaccination on Jan. 14, a day after New Jersey officials announced that people over age 65 would be eligible within the next few days. It took her almost two straight weeks of dialing and internet searches to book an appointment at hospitals that were supposed to be giving the vaccines. She finally made an appointment at a hospital in Newark. A few days before the date of her scheduled first shot, she wasn’t quite ready to declare victory.

“When I get there, I will celebrate,” said the 68-year-old Ms. Dasgupta, of Woodcliff Lake, N.J., the week before she and her husband, Debbir Dasgupta, 66, got their first dose on Jan. 30.

Since the pandemic hit almost a year ago, Ms. Dasgupta, a retired fundraiser, and her husband, a retired speechwriter, have mostly stayed inside their three-bedroom

townhome because of their age and underlying health conditions. Still able to serve as part-time caretakers of two grandchildren, they had been anxiously awaiting the vaccine. “We live in constant fear of Covid,” Ms. Dasgupta said.

The couple tried to register at four hospitals and one supermarket chain they were directed to from online government and other resources. After trying repeatedly every day for more than a week, she said, several hospitals wouldn’t allow them to even register.

She finally got through to make her appointment on the weekend of Jan. 23 after trying one of the hospital sites 30 to 40 times while sitting at her computer. “There has to be a better way,” she said.

—*Jim Carlton*

## A Vaccine Lottery



“I was so angry  
and afraid at  
the same time.”

—Rochelle Emmanuel

PHOTO: TAYLOR GLASCOCK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Rochelle Emmanuel, a 65-year-old retired licensed practical nurse in Chicago, said she hasn’t hugged or kissed her one-year-old grandson since last February.

“That really bothers me,” she said.

So she got up early on Jan. 25, the first day people her age qualified to get a vaccine. She couldn’t find the state portal where she thought she was supposed to be able to get an appointment.

Instead, she got a mass email from her primary care doctor at the University of Chicago saying that they didn’t have any shots and when they did, they would be given out by

lottery. She later listened to a press conference by city officials but didn't feel like they answered her questions.

"It was a lot of blah, blah, blah. I was so angry and afraid at the same time," she said.

Ms. Emmanuel, whose husband died three years ago, spent hours last week calling and going on the websites of local pharmacies to try to sign up for a shot. One chain wasn't offering appointments in Chicago yet and the other one was only serving their regular customers. Her adult children helped brainstorm different ways to get an appointment.

Finally, last Friday she was contacted by the University of Chicago system, saying that her lottery number had come up so she could make an appointment when one opened up. When she clicked through that day, there weren't any openings.

She spent a restless weekend wondering if she'd finally be able to get an appointment. On Monday, she called back and while she was on hold, she went back online and found out her appointment had been set for March 1.

"It's the only way to end this darkness," she said.

—*Joe Barrett*

## Log on at Midnight

"I go to the computer and check it. Nothing. Nothing whatsoever."

—Byron Ortiz



PHOTO: BYRON ORTIZ

Every night at midnight, Byron Ortiz logs on to his computer to look for a Covid-19 vaccination appointment, hoping his late-night efforts will one day pay off.

“Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. I go to the computer and check it. Nothing. Nothing whatsoever,” said Mr. Ortiz, 65 years old, who moved from his native Ecuador to the U.S. in the 1970s. “I don’t know how people got appointments.”

Mr. Ortiz, a retired high-school counselor, would like to find an appointment near his home in Oceanside, N.Y., a suburb on Long Island. But so far the only appointments that have come up in his online searches of the New York state website have been hours away in Upstate and Western New York—farther than he cared to drive

The precautions he has been forced to take to avoid getting Covid-19 have also taken a toll on his health, Mr. Ortiz said. He doesn’t go to the gym anymore and recently developed high blood pressure, which his doctor attributes to his lack of physical activity, he said.

He is also concerned about his 62-year-old wife, who isn’t yet eligible for the vaccine. He is worried what will happen if he can get the protection of the vaccine but his wife is left vulnerable. That isn’t fair either, he said.

Mr. Ortiz said he was hopeful the Biden administration would help increase the vaccine distribution. Until then, he just has to wait, he said.

“I’m extremely worried,” Mr. Ortiz said. “I want to get on with my life.”

—Joseph De Avila

## An Appointment at 4 a.m.



“My wife is very protective of me. She is younger than me, she’s in good health. We wear masks, we don’t see people anymore. If we eat, we eat outside.”

—Gary Sovia

PHOTO: GARY SOVA

Gary Sova's 4 a.m. vaccine appointment on Jan. 25 at State Farm Stadium in Glendale, Ariz.—the only time slot available—was supposed to mark the beginning of a return to some semblance of normalcy for the 67-year-old retired marketing executive. Instead, he was turned away.

The person who checked him in said he needed a QR code that was supposed to come in a confirmation email to receive his shot, he said. Mr. Sava, who had spent several hours each day looking for an appointment on the state health department website, never received the email, he said. Instead, he showed a screenshot of his appointment details and pleaded to speak with a manager.

“She goes, ‘I’ve turned back people from Tucson with oxygen tanks. My job is to say no, and it’s no,’ ” said Mr. Sova, who lives in Scottsdale, Ariz. “I was discouraged. Very, very discouraged.” A spokesman with the Arizona Department of Health Services said the screenshot provided by Mr. Sova didn’t show a completed appointment, and it was unclear whether he completed the full process.

Frustrated by the whole ordeal, he went home to renew his online search and got more bad news. All appointments on the state website were booked through February.

Mr. Sova, who also owns a home in Texas, said he would also try to get vaccinated there. He said he understands that others may need the vaccine more urgently, given that he is healthy. But Mr. Sova's father-in-law, who is in his 80s, almost died fighting off a bout of Covid-19, and that left his wife shaken, he said.

“We know how serious this is,” he said.

—*Joseph De Avila*

## **An Unannounced Visit**

“It makes me  
feel hopeless  
and really sad.”

—Ortencia Ramirez



PHOTO: DAVE COLE/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

After days of unsuccessful phone calls and internet searches for a Covid-19 vaccine appointment, Ortencia Ramirez decided to just show up unannounced at a vaccination site in Pasadena, Calif., to try her luck.

It didn't work. At the site, they told the semiretired real-estate agent she needed an appointment. She went home feeling dejected, she said.

“It makes me feel hopeless and really sad,” said Ms. Ramirez, 68, who lives in San Gabriel, Calif.

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#### SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

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*How have you or seniors in your life been dealing with the vaccination process? Join the conversation below.*

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The one time she did secure an appointment with a pharmacy, it was later canceled after the site ran out of doses, she said.

Ms. Ramirez said she is fearful for herself, but she also longs to hold her grandchildren. She wants to be with her 91-year-old mother, Eremelinda Ramirez, who she hasn't spent meaningful time with since March. Her mother, who has Alzheimer's disease, recently went into hospice care, she said.

Her mother received her first vaccine dose on Saturday, and Ms. Ramirez is waiting for her own vaccination before she visits.

“That’s the other thing that’s given me that drive to try to get it—it’s so that I can have some time with her,” Ms. Ramirez said. “You don’t want your loved one, if it’s their time to leave, to leave without at least feeling somebody touching them or some type of interaction.”

—Joseph De Avila

—Betsy McKay contributed to this article.

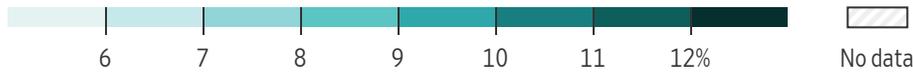
Write to Jim Carlton at [jim.carlton@wsj.com](mailto:jim.carlton@wsj.com)

**Shots given**

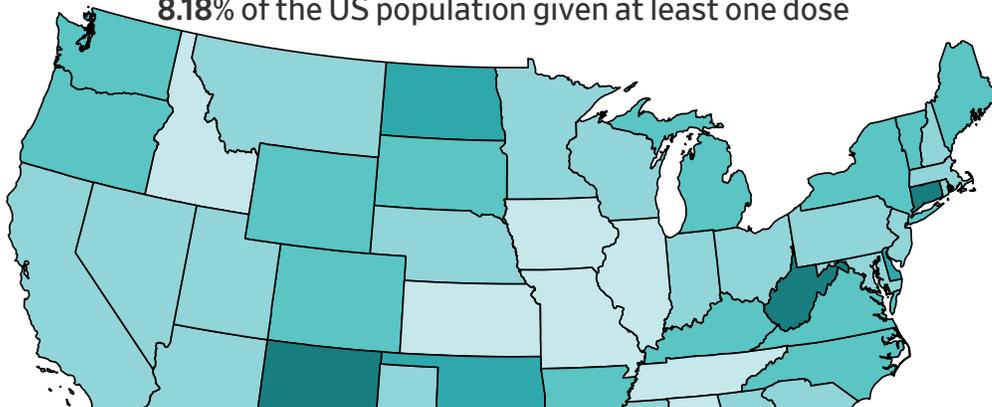
Doses distributed

Doses used

Share of state population given at least one dose



8.18% of the US population given at least one dose



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