

COVID-19

Playing favorites?

Hospital boards and donors get COVID jab

NEW YORK, Jan 31, (AP): While millions of Americans wait for the COVID-19 vaccine, hospital board members, their trustees and donors around the country have gotten early access to the scarce drug or offers for vaccinations, raising complaints about favoritism tainting decisions about who gets inoculated and when.

In Rhode Island, Attorney General Peter Neronha opened an inquiry after reports that two hospital systems offered their board members vaccinations. A Seattle-area hospital system was rebuked by Washington Gov. Jay Inslee after it offered COVID-19 vaccination appointments to major donors. And in Kansas, members of a hospital board received vaccinations during the first phase of the state's rollout, which was intended for people at greater risk for infection.

Hospitals in Florida, New Jersey and Virginia also have faced questions about distributing vaccines, including to donors, trustees and relatives of executives.

The disclosures could threaten public confidence in a national rollout already marked by vaccine shortages, appointment logjams and inconsistent standards state to state for determining who's eligible.

"We want people vaccinated based on priority, not privilege," Inslee spokesman Mike Faulk said. "Everyone deserves a fair opportunity to get vaccinated."

At the direction of the federal government, states have set up tiered distribution pipelines aimed first at protecting essential workers and those most at risk, including older Americans. In California, for example, medical workers, first responders, nursing home residents and people 65 and older are at the front of the line for the coveted shots.

In some cases, it's not clear if rules were violated when people outside priority groups received vaccinations. Guidelines vary by state, and hospitals can have leeway making decisions. In California, providers have more latitude to make sure they do not squander hard-to-get vaccine in cases where it might be at risk of going to waste.

In Rhode Island, Attorney General Peter Neronha began an inquiry into two hospital systems after The Providence Journal reported this month that some board members of hospital systems Lifespan and Care New England had been offered vaccinations.

In an interview Friday with The Associated Press, Neronha said the report, if true, raised questions about whether the vaccine was being distributed appropriately.

Supply

"We all know the stakes are incredibly high. People are frustrated, they're scared," Neronha said. "Given the lack of supply here, every dose is critical."

Care New England spokeswoman Raina Smith said in an emailed statement that administrators would cooperate with the probe. Lifespan spokeswoman Kathleen Hart emailed a statement saying the hospital system had followed guidance from Rhode Island health officials and had recently received clearance to vaccinate employers and volunteers considered at lower risk, "including board members, who fall into the volunteer category."

The Seattle Times has reported that Overlake Medical Center & Clinics emailed about 110 donors who gave more than \$10,000 to the hospital system, telling them that vaccine slots were available. The email gave the donors an access code to register for appointments "by invite" only.

At the same time, the public Overlake registration site was fully booked through March. The medical center's chief operating officer said the invitation was a quick-fix solution after the hospital's scheduling system failed. Overlake shut down online access to the invite-only clinic after getting a call from Inslee's staff, and CEO J. Michael Marsh issued an apology.

Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan called on the state to reassess its vaccine policy to make sure the most vulnerable, especially people of color, are prioritized. Hospital donors should be banned, she said.

"We have an obligation to ensure that our fight against the pandemic does not exacerbate inequities," she said.

Arthur Caplan, medical ethics director at New York University's Grossman School of Medicine, said it's not surprising that hospitals supplied with vaccine to inoculate their workers would interpret guidance broadly and include those who don't work directly with patients, such as computer technicians.

But giving hospital board members early access to the vaccine, regardless of an individual hospital's rationale, only damages public confidence that shots are being distributed equitably, Caplan said.

"It's a reminder that if you're rich, well-connected and know how to work the system, you can get access that others can't," Caplan said. "Here it is, right in our face, when it comes to vaccinations."

Fred Naranjo, owner of a San Francisco insurance company and chairman of the board at St. Rose Hospital in Hayward, California, got a first vaccine before Christmas along with first responders and frontline medical workers.

Naranjo told KNTV-TV he wasn't seeking special treatment ahead of others. He said he's often at the hospital "walking the halls, talking to people," and wanted to serve as a role model for others in the Hispanic community to get vaccinated.

"The main thing I wanted to do is to show people to take the vaccine and not to be afraid," Naranjo said. "That it is safe. They need to be protected."

Vaccination

Hospital spokesman Sam Singer said Naranjo was the only board member to receive a vaccination, because he visits the hospital weekly to meet with doctors, nurses and patients.

In Kansas, members of the Stormont Vail Health board, along with its fundraising board, received vaccinations during the first phase of the program, which was focused on nursing homes and health care workers. Spokesman Matt Lara said workers got shots first, and board members received them because they govern the hospital and its daily operations.

In California's Santa Clara County, southeast of San Francisco, health officials are withholding COVID-19 vaccines from a hospital after it offered the vaccine to about 65 teachers and staffers from a wealthy school district in Silicon Valley, skipping people over 65 and health care workers.

Teachers and staff at Los Gatos Union School District received an email last week from Superintendent Paul Johnson offering vaccines ahead of schedule. In the email, first reported by the San Jose Spotlight news outlet, Johnson said the hospital's offer was made in gratitude because the district raised funds for 3,500 meals that went to frontline workers at Good Samaritan Hospital and another facility.

Teachers, in the email, were told to impersonate health care workers despite the threat of perjury to obtain access to the vaccine. Good Samaritan CEO Joe DeSchryver said in a statement Tuesday that all appointments for a vaccine for people who are not health care workers or over 65 have been canceled.

"We regret the mistake we made in our efforts to use all vaccines prior to expiration," he wrote.

The US recorded 162,601 new coronavirus cases and 3,483 related deaths in the past 24 hours, according to Johns Hopkins University.

The tally showed that the confirmed cases nationwide reached 25,929,282 and at least 436,678 deaths.

Furthermore, 101,003 people are currently hospitalized with coronavirus in the US, according to the COVID Tracking Project.

Meanwhile, at least 27,884,661 vaccine shots have been administered, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



Inslee



In this Dec 15, 2020 file photo, a droplet falls from a syringe after a health care worker was injected with the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine in Providence, R.I. Some hospitals around the US are facing complaints about favoritism and line-jumping after their board members and donors received COVID-19 vaccinations or offers for the prized inoculations. (AP)

Health

Children's ER visits jump by 44pct in 2020

Calls for mental health days for kids

SALT LAKE CITY, Jan 31, (AP): When she was growing up, Sophie Corroon struggled to get through a ballet class or soccer tryout without having an anxiety attack.

The idea of going to sleepovers or being home alone left her feeling panicked. Corroon's anxiety grew even more during high school in Salt Lake City, when the pressures of getting into college left her in tears at school or toiling for hours on assignments.

Corroon, now 20, has struggled with her mental health since fourth grade, and she's not alone. And now, the coronavirus pandemic has multiplied the pressures on kids - many have spent almost a year doing remote learning, isolated from their friends and classmates. The portion of children's emergency-room visits related to mental health was 44% higher in 2020, compared with the year before.

State lawmakers are increasingly seeking more support for kids. This year, legislation proposed in Utah and Arizona would add mental or behavioral health to the list of reasons students can be absent from class, similar to staying out with a physical illness. Similar laws have passed in Oregon, Maine, Colorado and Virginia in the past two years.

Struggling

Offering mental health days can help children and parents communicate and prevent struggling students from falling behind in school or ending up in crisis, said Debbie Plotnick, vice president of the nonprofit advocacy group Mental Health America. Plotnick said mental health days can be even more effective when paired with mental health services in schools.

"We know that this year has been extra hard, and we know that it's hard for young people," Plotnick said. "That's why it's so essential that students feel comfortable to come forward and say ... 'I need to take some actions to support my mental health.'"

In Arizona, Democratic Sen. Sean Bowie has introduced a mental health day measure for the second time after legislation stalled in March as the pandemic took hold. Republican Gov. Doug Ducey has taken an interest in youth suicide and mental health, and Bowie said he's confident it will be signed into law. The bill passed the state Senate unanimously Thursday.

Conservative Utah passed a law in 2018 letting kids take time off school for a mental illness. A new proposal from Republican Rep. Mike Winder would allow absences for students to deal with other kinds of mental pressures to further normalize treating a mental health concern like a physical one.

"If a student has a panic attack today, because of some drama going on at home, that's not mental illness necessarily," Winder said. "But maybe they need that day to catch their breath and maintain their mental health."

Under the Utah bill, which passed out of committee Friday and will move to the House floor, mental health days would be treated like any other excused absence, Winder said. A parent would need to excuse their child, and students would still be expected to

contracts will be honored, we expect that vaccines will continue to be supplied," he added.

While the UK has made progress in its campaign to vaccinate the population against the coronavirus, the EU has faced complaints and criticism for its slow start.

Concerns over the pace of the rollout across the EU's 27 member nations grew over the last week after British-Swedish pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca



Sophie Corroon, a sophomore at the University of Washington, poses for a photo on the school's campus Jan. 25, in Seattle. Corroon helped work on proposed legislation in her home state of Utah to allow students to take mental health days to lessen stigma and help reduce youth suicide. (AP)

Discovery

New supercomputer in Wyo: A new supercomputer in Wyoming will rank among the world's fastest and help study phenomena including climate change, severe weather, wildfires and solar flares.

Houston-based Hewlett Packard Enterprise won a bid to provide the \$35 million to \$40 million machine for a supercomputing center in Cheyenne, the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado, has announced.

The HPE-Cray EX supercomputer will theoretically be able to perform almost 20 quadrillion calculations per second - 3.5 times faster than the existing machine at the NCAR-Wyoming Supercomputing Center.

The new machine's maximum speed per second will be roughly equivalent to each person on Earth completing a math equation every second for an entire month.

That power will enable some of the most sophisticated simulations yet of large-scale natural and human-influenced events.

The supercomputer should rank among the world's 25 fastest after it's installed this year and goes into operation in early 2022, according to the National Center for Atmospheric Research.

"It will support basic research in ways that will lead to more detailed and useful predictions of the world around us, thereby helping to make our society more resilient to increasingly costly disasters and contributing to improved human health and well-being," center Director **Everette Joseph** said in a news release.

More than 4,000 people from hundreds of universities and other institutions worldwide have used the supercomputing center since it opened in 2012.

The facility's current supercomputer, named Cheyenne, is over three times faster than its predecessor, which was named Yellowstone. (AP)

UK sees smooth job supplies: The British government said Saturday that it does not expect any disruptions to its orders for coronavirus vaccines after the European Union emphasized it would not trigger an emergency provision of the Brexit deal as part of its strategy to monitor export of doses produced in the EU.

Cabinet Minister Michael Gove said the government expects the vaccines to be supplied as planned after the EU addressed the "mistake" in its proposal to tighten export rules for COVID-19 vaccines produced in the 27 member nations.

The UK government complained late Friday that the bloc had invoked an emergency clause in its divorce deal with Britain to introduce controls on exports from EU member Ireland into Northern Ireland, which is part of the UK.

After a call between Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the EU's executive commission, the EU said it was not invoking the article of the Brexit agreement allowing either side to override parts of the deal.

People desperate for COVID-19 'guides' seek local journalists

NEW YORK, Jan 31, (AP): Calling a hospital to see if a bed was available for a COVID-19 patient isn't part of Houston television news anchor Chauncy Glover's job description. Neither is guiding a viewer online to find a place to be vaccinated.

He's done both, and isn't alone. Listeners and readers across the country are reaching out directly to journalists for help during the coronavirus pandemic, and many are responding.

"We are now doing more than we bargained for," Glover said. "We have to be smarter on these topics. We have to know more. For so many people, it may be life or death."

It began for Glover last spring, when he came down with COVID-19 and told his story to KTRK-TV viewers. By phone, email and text, he was peppered with questions after getting back to work: "What did it feel like? Should I be worried if I have this symptom? What did you do during quarantine to keep from going crazy?"

One viewer described symptoms that made Glover suggest he go to the hospital, and the news anchor followed up with calls to find space for him.

During the past month, inquiries about how to get vaccinated have become most common. Southern California Public Radio, which has an aggressive community outreach program, had 275 questions about that in a two-day period last week, said Ashley Alvarado, director of community engagement.

Listeners have also asked Alvarado's team about unemployment benefits, about whether or not they should cancel a family wedding or if

make up their schoolwork.

In Arizona, specific mental health day policies would be up to each school district, Bowie said.

Theresa Nguyen, a licensed clinical social worker, said she's concerned about the potential long-term mental and academic effects that students may face from the pandemic. In addition to growing reports of anxiety and depression, Nguyen said, many students say they don't feel like they're absorbing class material virtually and they're not getting enough support.

"They feel like, 'Nobody cares that I'm struggling, so I'm basically being communicated to that I need to just deal with it by myself,'" said Nguyen, Mental Health America's chief program officer. "And for a lot of youth, that means increased self-harm and suicide."

For the last few years, Utah leaders have searched for ways to reduce an alarming rate of youth suicides. The pandemic has lent urgency, with many young people isolated from friends and school activities.

Winder's bill is modeled after a similar program in Oregon that his daughter, Jessica Lee, found through her

work on a youth-focused committee with the Utah chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. In Oregon, students are given five excused absences every three months, and those can be either physical sick days or mental health days.

Lee, who is a senior at Southern Utah University studying clinical psychology, said she was inspired by youth activists who successfully championed the Oregon bill in 2019.

Lee and Corroon both work with the committee to help teenagers navigate their mental health. Over the years, Corroon learned to manage her anxiety with medication and therapy and is now a sophomore at the University of Washington, where she plans to study public health.

Part of her routine is taking a step back to prioritize her mental health - a chance she says other kids deserve, too.

"I definitely needed those days to just stay home or seek out a resource rather than forcing myself to go to school and putting more stress on my mental health," Corroon said.

Alvarado has staggered the work hours of people answering calls and similarly guards the mental health of colleagues who hear stories of trauma over and over again.

Several of the people Krieger speaks to are simply grateful to hear another human being, instead of speaking to machines and getting calls dropped, or directed to an alienating online experience.



Johnson



Joseph

said it could not supply EU members with as many doses as originally anticipated because of production capacity limits.

AstraZeneca Chief Executive Pascal Soriot said that vaccine delivery figures in the contract with the EU were targets, not firm commitments, and the company was unable to meet them because plants in Europe had lower than expected yields from the biological process used to produce the vaccine. (AP)