

Coronavirus

Shot hesitancy persists

US gets creative in 'vaccine outreach'

BATON ROUGE, La., April 18, (AP): Brass bands playing at a 24-hour drive-thru coronavirus vaccine event. Doses delivered to commercial fishermen minutes from the docks. Pop-up immunization clinics at a Buddhist temple, homeless shelters, truck stops and casinos, with shots available at night or on weekends.

And now, door-to-door outreach getting underway in neighborhoods where few people have gotten vaccinated.

Louisiana is making a full-court press to get shots in arms, with aggressive - and sometimes creative - outreach to make it as easy as possible to get vaccinated. The effort comes as vaccine supplies are surging but demand is not.

The state has enlisted health care workers, colleges, community groups and church pastors to help cajole the hesitant and set up vaccination events. Democratic Gov. **John Bel Edwards** has thrown open vaccine access to anyone age 16 or older. The health department has launched a call center to answer vaccine questions and set up appointments for those without internet access or limited tech skills.

Civic organizations and faith-based groups working with the state have started using get-out-the-vote tactics, knocking on doors and making phone calls, to pitch the vaccine.

But even with widespread ease of access, Louisiana officials struggle with a problem almost as vexing as COVID-19 itself: How to persuade those who are iffy about the shot to roll up their sleeves.

"I, quite frankly, don't know what folks are waiting for. It just doesn't make sense to me, but I'm going to continue to appeal to them," Edwards said.

Health officials anticipate a difficult time reaching the threshold scientists believe is needed to stop uncontrolled spread of COVID-19, a benchmark of 70% or higher of the population having immunity either through vaccination or past infection. The problem has taken on particular urgency as more virulent and contagious virus strains reach the United States.

Concerns

State surveys indicate 40% or more of Louisiana residents are hesitant about getting the vaccine or entirely unwilling to do so. And while Louisiana is administering doses at rates greater than some other Southern states, it remains among the bottom six in vaccinating adults 18 and older, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Other states also are trying novel approaches, either because they've seen noticeable dips in vaccine interest or have concerns about equitable access. Even with the resistance, the United States has shown remarkable progress: As of Friday, more than 200 million doses have been administered to Americans, and nearly half of American adults have received at least one dose.

Alaska's health department is weighing creating vaccine clinics in airports. Ohio's health agency asked vaccine providers to develop sites near bus stops and to consider offering mobile immunization services. In Connecticut, the health department launched an effort to call residents directly to schedule appointments. Mississippi is working with local organizations to bring vaccinations directly to homebound elderly people. Alabama's health agency surveyed vaccine reluctance to determine how it should craft messaging to appeal to the hesitant.

Dr. Catherine O'Neal, chief medical officer of Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center in Louisiana's capital, Baton Rouge, said she's hearing from people who believe vaccine misinformation from social media, but also from those who simply don't have a sense of urgency about getting a shot. Others worry about side effects.

"We have enough vaccine. ... If you want an appointment, you can get it within a week," O'Neal said. But for many "there's no driving force on when they'll get it."

Nearly 31% of the state's population has received at least one dose of a vaccine that can require two doses, according to state data. More than 22% have been fully immunized.

Shane Pizani, a former Marine who lives in a New Orleans suburb, contracted COVID-19 shortly after Thanksgiving, with lingering symptoms for more than a month. Still, he was jittery about the vaccine.

To alleviate his worries, he did research and discussed it with his doctor, gaining information he said put him more at ease. When he got his first shot in mid-February, he had a panic attack.

Still, he got the second dose and then went to work to persuade his mom - who repeated anti-vaccine conspiracy theories she saw on social media.

"I just kept on, kept on, kept on. I told her, 'We're going to stop coming around with the kids, because I cannot live with myself if I gave you COVID and something happened to you,'" Pizani said. "So, she finally went and got her appointment."

Recovery

Kerri Tobin, an education professor at Louisiana State University, initially worried the vaccine came together too quickly to be safe. Then, she watched as more friends in the health care industry and others she trusted posted on social media about receiving their doses.

"I see someone else doing it and they are OK. And that keeps happening," she said.

Tobin received her second dose of the Pfizer vaccine at the end of March.

Health officials believe that sort of word-of-mouth among friends and family will help boost vaccinations.

Surveys show those who are reticent or don't want the vaccine cross racial groups and regions. A recent LSU survey showed greater uninterest from Republicans than Democrats. State officials have particular concern about southwest Louisiana, where people are struggling with recovery from back-to-back hurricanes and appear less focused on the pandemic.

In each instance, Louisiana's health department and state officials are trying to find a persuasive approach. For example, data shows Black people have gotten vaccinated at lower rates so the state reached out to African American pastors and is hosting immunization events at their churches. The state's historically Black college system is doing its own targeted outreach enlisting alumni, and faith-based and social organizations to encourage people to get vaccinated.

Some parishes have started delivering vaccines to seniors who are disabled at home and worked out deals with ride-share services to offer free transportation to vaccination events.

Such vaccine outreach may be further complicated by this week's pause of the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine after reports of rare blood clots in six women who received it. Experts say it's too early to tell whether that will increase reluctance in Louisiana and elsewhere.

Mike Bayham, secretary of the Republican Party of Louisiana, had a rough battle with COVID-19 in March 2020. He was bedridden for a week and dealing with symptoms for weeks longer.

He's now received his first shot - and he's encouraging fellow Republicans to do the same. Bayham tells friends and colleagues the vaccine is one of the greatest achievements of Donald Trump's presidency, and he shares details of what it feels like to have COVID-19.

"You don't want this virus. Whatever the vaccine can do to you, the virus is far worse," Bayham said.



Edwards



Blanca Ortiz, 84, celebrates after learning that she will be dismissed from the Eurnekian Ezeiza Hospital, on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, Argentina, Thursday, Aug. 13, 2020, several weeks after being admitted with COVID-19. Photographer Natacha Pisarenko said the moment was one of the few she witnessed in months of covering COVID-19 in which doctors and nurses allowed themselves to feel joy. 'The moment made all of us in the room with her laugh and feel hopeful again,' Pisarenko said. 'It was the brightest moment for me while covering such a heavy story.' (AP)



In this photo released by Roscosmos Space Agency, Russian cosmonaut Sergey Kud-Sverchikov sits in the chair shortly after landing a Russian Soyuz MS-17 space capsule southeast of the Kazakh town of Zhezkazgan, Kazakhstan, Saturday, April 17. A Soyuz space capsule carrying NASA's Kate Rubins and Russians Sergey Ryzhikov and Sergey Kud-Sverchikov landed at 0455 GMT Saturday in the steppes of Kazakhstan. (AP)

Discovery

3 astronauts return to Earth: An American astronaut and two Russians have returned to Earth after six months aboard the International Space Station.

A Soyuz space capsule carrying NASA's Kate Rubins and Russians Sergey Ryzhikov and Sergey Kud-Sverchikov landed at 0455 GMT (12:55 a.m. EDT) Saturday in the steppes of Kazakhstan.

Dmitry Rogozin, head of the Russian space agency Roscosmos, said all three were feeling well after they were extracted from the capsule and began reacclimating to the pull of gravity.

The three had arrived at the orbiting laboratory complex on Oct. 14.

There now are seven people aboard the ISS: NASA astronaut Mark Vande Hei and Russians Oleg Novitskiy and Pyotr Dubrov arrived on April 9; Americans Michael Hopkins, Victor Glover and Shannon Walker, and Japan's Soichi Noguchi, came aboard in November on the SpaceX Crew Dragon Resilience, the first ISS docking under NASA's Commercial Crew Program. (AP)

Ontario limits outdoor gatherings: Canada's most populous province is limiting outdoor gatherings to those in the same household and will close playgrounds and golf courses amid a record wave of coronavirus infections fueled by variants, Ontario's premier announced Friday. The decision sparked widespread condemnation in a province already on lockdown.

Police in Ontario will have the authority to require any individual not at home to provide a reason that they're out and provide their address. Tickets can be written.

"Law enforcement now has the ability to ask anyone outside their residence, including motorists, to indicate their purpose for leaving home and provide their address," the Ontario Provincial Police tweeted.

But at least three other police forces in the province are declining to do random stops and Toronto Mayor **John Tory** said he is very concerned about arbitrary stops.

Quebec closed its border to Ontario and Ontario Premier Doug Ford said interprovincial travel will be limited. Big box stores will be limited to 25 percent capacity. Schools are already closed and students will resume online learning next week. Ontario has averaged almost 5,000 new infections a day in recent days.

Ford complained about crowded parks and playgrounds, but made no mention of workplaces where the virus is spreading.

The new restrictions do not include mandated paid sick days, which health experts have said would protect vulnerable essential workers and help stop the spread of the virus in workplaces and the community at large. (AP)

Alaska to offer tourists 'jabs': Alaska Gov. **Mike Dunleavy** said Friday that COVID-19 vaccines would be made available at key airports in the state starting June 1, in unveiling plans aimed at bolstering the state's pandemic-battered tourist industry.

Health

US ramping up coronavirus gene-mapping

\$1.7b network to track virus variants

WASHINGTON, April 18, (AP): The US is setting up a \$1.7 billion national network to identify and track worrisome coronavirus mutations whose spread could trigger another pandemic wave, the Biden administration announced Friday.

White House officials unveiled a strategy that features three components: a major funding boost for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and state health departments to ramp up coronavirus gene-mapping; the creation of six "centers of excellence" partnerships with universities to conduct research and develop technologies for gene-based surveillance of pathogens; and building a data system to better share and analyze information on emerging disease threats, so knowledge can be turned into action.

"Even as we accelerate our efforts to get shots into arms, more dangerous variants are growing, causing increases in cases in people without immunity," White House coronavirus adviser Andy Slavitt told reporters. That "requires us to intensify our efforts to quickly test for and find the genetic sequence of the virus as it spreads."

Effort

The new effort relies on money approved by Congress as part of President Joe Biden's coronavirus relief package to break what experts say is a feast-or-famine cycle in US preparedness for disease threats. The coronavirus is only one example. Others pathogens have included Ebola and Zika, and respiratory viruses like SARS in 2002 and MERS in 2012, which did not become major problems in the United States. Typically, the government scrambles to counter a potential threat, but funding dries up when it recedes. The new genomic surveillance initiative aims to create a permanent infrastructure.

"It's a transformative amount of money," Mary Lee Watts, federal affairs director at the American Society for Microbiology, said in a recent interview. "It has the potential not only to get ahead of the current crisis, but it is going to help us in the future. This is a program that has been underfunded for years."

The Biden administration's move comes as a variant known as B.1.1.7, which first emerged in the United Kingdom, has become the predominant strain in the US. In hard-hit Michigan, the more transmissible mutation accounts for more than half the cases, according to CDC data. That's also the case in Minnesota. Vaccines are effective against the so-called UK variant, but other mutations circulating around the globe have shown resistance to currently available vaccines.

CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said Friday the US is now averaging nearly 70,000 new coronavirus cases daily, up from about 53,000 just four weeks ago. Hospitalizations have been trending higher, and deaths were up for the third day in a row. Along with relaxed restrictions on gatherings and indoor dining, the emergence of variants that spread more easily is part of the reason for the worsening trend.

"In order for us to even have the possibility of getting back to normal by the

After child's death, US regulator warns about Peloton treadmill

NEW YORK, April 18, (AP): Safety regulators warned people with kids and pets Saturday to immediately stop using a treadmill made by Peloton after one child died and others were injured.

The US Consumer Product Safety Commission said children and at least one pet were pulled, pinned and entrapped under the rear roller of the Tread+ treadmill, leading to fractures, scrapes and the death of one child.

The safety commission said in a news release and in emails that it knows of 39 "incidents" with the treadmill, involving "multiple" or "dozens" of children, but it did not specify a number of children. It said the majority of the incidents resulted in injuries, including the one death.

The commission posted a video on its YouTube page of a child being pulled under the treadmill.

Of the 39 incidents, 23 involved children, according to New York-based Peloton Interactive Inc.; 15 included objects like medicine balls, and one included a pet, it said.

Peloton said in a news release that the warning from the safety commission was "inaccurate and misleading." It said there's no reason to stop using the treadmill as long as children and pets are kept away from it at all times, it is turned

off when not in use, and a safety key is removed.

But the safety commission said that in at least one episode, a child was pulled under the treadmill while a parent was running on it, suggesting it can be dangerous to children even while a parent is present.

If adults want to keep using the treadmill, the commission said, they should use it only in a locked room so children and pets can't come near it. When not in use, the treadmill should be unplugged and the safety key taken out and hidden away. The commission also said to keep exercise balls and other objects away from it, because those have been pulled under the treadmill, too.

Peloton is best known for its stationary bikes, but it introduced the treadmill about three years ago and now calls it the Tread+. It costs more than \$4,000.

Sales of Peloton equipment have soared during the pandemic as virus-weary people avoid gyms and workout at home instead. The company brought in \$1 billion in revenue in the last three months of 2020, more than double its revenue from the same period a year before.

The commission did not say how many of the Peloton treadmills have been sold.

fall we need to massively scale up our genomic surveillance," said Esther Krofah, who directs the Faster Cures initiative of the Milken Institute. "It's the insurance program that you need to have in place not just now, not just for COVID, but going forward for other pathogens of concern."

Genomic sequencing essentially involves mapping the DNA of an organism, the key to its unique features. It's done by high-tech machines that can cost from several hundred thousand dollars to \$1 million or more. Technicians trained to run the machines and computing capacity to support the whole process add to costs. Another hurdle is getting local, state and federal labs all working together.

The CDC and collaborating labs were completing only 116 coronavirus gene sequences a week at the end of last year, according to the CDC's website. "We started in a hole," said Slavitt.

The White House says the weekly count is now about 29,000, but experts say in a large, diverse country like the U.S. those numbers need to be much higher to keep pace with potential changes to the virus. Viruses are highly efficient at spreading, developing mutations that enable them to keep reproducing.

White House officials said the government is releasing to states and territories an initial \$240 million out of \$1 billion allocated to expand genomic sequencing. Another \$400 million will go to launch the six research partnerships with academic institutions, dubbed Centers of Excellence in

Genomic Epidemiology. Finally, \$300 million will go to set up the data sharing system, which is being called the National Bioinformatics Infrastructure.

Also:

NEW YORK: Federal officials on Friday reversed **Trump** administration restrictions on using human fetal tissue for medical research.

The changes clear the way for using government money on work that in the past has led to treatments for a variety of diseases, including COVID-19.

Government scientists now will be able to resume research that uses tissue from elective abortions. Scientists at universities also can now apply for federal grants without getting approval from a special ethics panel for any such work.

Health and Human Services Secretary **Xavier Becerra** determined there were "no new ethical issues that require special review," so the agency will return to using procedures that had been in place for decades before then-President Donald Trump's administration changed the policy in June 2019, a statement from the agency said.

Those provisions include following applicable laws, such as obtaining informed consent from anyone donating such tissue. The changes were detailed in a notice to researchers.

Two dozen members of Congress had written to Becerra urging the change praised the move. The restrictions were "politically motivated and unnecessary," they wrote earlier this week.



Tory



Dunleavy

southeast Alaska, that rely heavily on summer tourism.

He said the state has not ruled out suing the federal government, as Florida has, over the issue.

About 40% of those eligible for a vaccine in Alaska, who are 16 or older, are fully vaccinated, according to the state health department, and health officials have been looking for new ways to encourage more people to get vaccinated. (AP)

Dunleavy, a Republican, outlined plans for a national marketing campaign aimed at luring tourists using federal aid money and said the vaccine offering is "probably another good reason to come to the state of Alaska in the summer."

Dunleavy and other state leaders have been pushing to allow large cruise ships to return to Alaska after COVID-19 restrictions kept them away last year, hitting hard businesses and communities, particularly in