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Niagara County taking new approach to vaccinations as demand decreases

A few months ago ... even just a few weeks ago ... the logjam to secure a COVID-19 vaccination appointment was substantial. People would move from website to website, from clinics run by New York state to Niagara County's clinic and then to pharmacies and health care providers, all in search of open (and elusive) appointments. It was not uncommon to hear of people driving to Syracuse, or beyond, to get their vaccination shot. Securing an appointment appeared to be the equivalent of finding a golden ticket in a Willy Wonka chocolate bar; others referred to it as the "Vaccination Hunger Games" (depending on your era of reference).

And now, suddenly, we have appeared to hit a vaccination wall – not just in Niagara County, but across the state and country. There are a few thousand appointments available right now in our community with no one taking them. This would not be such an issue if our percent of population vaccinated was 70% or higher, but as of this writing, Niagara County is at about 45%.

There was always going to be a percent of the population that simply refused the vaccine. Most experts have pegged that number at somewhere between 10% and

20%. So if that is indeed the case, that still leaves a significant portion of the population with some kind of "vaccine hesitation." Now, we must begin to find out why that is the case and, more importantly, how we can reach them.

First, we are going to be winding down the Niagara County mass-vaccination clinic that had been run at the Kenan Center and then the Transit Drive-In Theater in Lockport. These clinics were huge successes in efficiently servicing large numbers of people at once, but with dwindling numbers, this approach no longer makes sense. Instead, the county Health Department will begin smaller clinics that will set up in different parts of the county beginning May 6. The hope is that, by going right into people's "backyards," we can encourage participation by those looking for or needing a more convenient option.

The clinic will be in our neighborhood on May 25 at the Lewiston-Porter Community Resource Center. Preregistration is encouraged, but walk-ins are welcome. More information can be found by going to niagaracounty.com and clicking on the blue box that says "COVID-19 Vaccination Info."

But, accessibility is only part of the equation. The recent pause of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine further heightened concerns for some about the safety of the vaccines. The CDC reviewed the data and showed that any issue is extremely rare, and then allowed the J&J

shots to resume.

We need to do all we can to answer people's questions and allay their fears so they can have the confidence to get vaccinated. If you have questions or concerns, please speak with your primary care physician. Your doctor knows your health situation best and will be able to give you accurate medical advice, which is not always the case when chatting with friends or reading social media posts.

Data shows that minority communities are definitely trailing behind in the percent of people vaccinated – not just locally, but on a national scale. This was anticipated and is a driving force behind the efforts of the Niagara Falls Health Equity Task Force. This task force is looking at several strategies on how best to boost minority community vaccinations. Rolanda Ward, director of Niagara University's Rose Bente Lee Ostapenko Center for Race, Equity and Mission, is leading this effort among multiple community agencies and is focusing on the need for

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substantial public outreach throughout our county.

It also appears that, generally speaking, there are many young adults who are just not in any rush to get vaccinated. Many feel they are young and healthy and the risk of COVID-19 is low. Yet, this is also the population that drove our most recent spike in positive cases.

On one hand, it's better that the average age of positive cases is decreasing, as younger people do tend to get less sick and are less likely to be hospitalized. But that's not to say they are risk-free. Again, we will need new, targeted

strategies to reach this group and find the incentives that will encourage them to make those appointments.

Like everything with this pandemic, things can change in a hurry. Let's hope that the next big change is a significant uptick in vaccinations that get us closer to herd immunity. Every shot in the arm is one step closer to a return to living our lives the way we all want to.

NC Department of Health offering several free COVID-19 vaccination clinics across Niagara County

The Niagara County Department of Health will hold several free COVID-19 vaccination clinics across Niagara County throughout the month of May.

"As our large volume vaccination operations begin to slow, we are pivoting to now bring our fast and efficient clinics to various communities," Public Health Director Daniel J. Stapleton said. "We are closing the gap by making the vaccine even more accessible, especially for those that reside in areas outside of the major cities."

Director of Public Health Planning and Emergency Preparedness

Register

Find links for each of the six area locations at the Tribune/Sentinel website, www.wnypapers.com

Elise Pignatora said, "We strongly recommend preregistration; however, walk-in participants will be accepted."

To secure an appointment, individuals 18 years of age and older may visit www.niagaracounty.com and click on the blue box that says "COVID-19 Vaccination Info." Niagara County residents who do not

have internet access may register for an appointment by calling 211 or 1-888-696-9211.

Individuals who receive their first-dose Moderna COVID-19 vaccine at one of these clinics will have a second appointment scheduled for the same time and at the same location, four weeks following their first dose. Participants will receive a card onsite with the date and time indicated and a confirmation email will follow a few days later. Participants are encouraged to keep in mind when scheduling their first appointment that their second appointment will

occur at the same time of day.

Stapleton said, "Based on what we know about COVID-19 vaccines, people who have been fully vaccinated can start to do some things that they had stopped doing because of the pandemic. Let's get back to the things we love. Get vaccinated."

For more information about COVID-19 vaccine, visit the Niagara County Department of Health website at <https://www.niagaracounty.com/health> or follow on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/niagaracountyhealth>.

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