

# Race to vaccinate older Americans advances in many states

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In this Feb. 3, 2021, file photo, a senior receives a COVID-19 vaccine from a healthcare worker after arriving on a bus to a vaccination site at Anquan Boldin Stadium in Pahokee, Fla. About three-quarters of all first-dose shots in Florida have gone to those 65 years or older. (Greg Lovett/The Palm Beach Post via AP, File)

Two months after the first COVID-19 shots were administered, the race to vaccinate older Americans is gaining traction, with more than a third of people 65 and up having received their first dose in states that have provided data.

The finding comes from an Associated Press analysis of information from 27 states where data is available. Those states account for just over half of all first doses administered nationwide.

"This is very good news. This is a sign we're doing it right," said Ali Mokdad, professor of health metrics sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle. Vaccine hesitancy is dropping quickly as older Americans talk to their friends who have been vaccinated, he said. "They're watching people they know get the [vaccine](#) and seeing it's safe."

The effort is uneven, with many other states still lagging behind on vaccinations of the higher-risk population.

Mokdad added: "We can do better. I can't wait for the day when all those who want the vaccine can get the vaccine. The system we have in place is working. We have to keep pushing for more vaccine."

The proportion of vaccines given to those 65 years and older varies. It's about three-quarters of all first-dose shots in Florida and more than two-thirds in North Carolina.



Wake County Health Department workers along with nurses and volunteers from area hospitals and emergency services are seen during a drive-thru COVID-19 mass vaccination event at PNC arena in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, Feb. 11, 2021. Two months after the first COVID-19 shots were administered, the race to vaccinate older Americans is gaining traction, with more than half of states reporting that a third of people 65 and up have received their first dose. (AP Photo/Gerry Broome)

In Indiana, Alaska and West Virginia, almost half of the population 65 years and older has received the first dose. In North Carolina, Louisiana, Colorado, Florida and Utah, about a third of that population has received the first dose.

Oregon, Pennsylvania, Kansas, Nebraska and Maryland, are on the lower

end, with 20% or less of the 65-and-older population. The administration of Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf and a bipartisan group of state lawmakers said Wednesday that they would create a vaccine task force that will brainstorm ways to administer COVID-19 shots more rapidly.

As of Wednesday, the federal government had [distributed 46.4 million vaccine doses to states and other jurisdictions](#), according to statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Older Americans have borne the brunt of the deaths and hospitalizations from the virus, which has claimed [more than 473, 000 lives](#) in the U.S. [About 80% of the people who have died from COVID have been adults 65 and older.](#)



Wake County Health Department workers along with nurses and volunteers from area hospitals and emergency services assist during a drive-thru COVID-19 vaccination event at PNC arena in Raleigh, N.C., Thursday, Feb. 11, 2021. Two months after the first COVID-19 shots were administered, the race to vaccinate older Americans is gaining traction, with more than half of states reporting that a third of people 65 and up have received their first dose. (AP Photo/Gerry Broome)

There's not yet enough data to analyze whether vaccination is reducing infections and deaths in that age group, Mokdad said. But his research center, the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, plans to look at that during the coming weeks.

Experts recommend that people [continue wearing masks and practicing social distancing](#) even after receiving COVID-19 shots. Although recipients are expected to get some level of protection within a couple of weeks of the first shot, full protection may not happen until a couple weeks after the second shot. It's unclear whether vaccinated people can still spread the virus.

Still, the vaccines have already had a real impact on the lives of older Americans.

Stephanie LaBumbard, 80, spent most of last year alone and separated from family at home in Cadillac, Michigan. Now she's feeling a surge in positivity after getting her second vaccine dose.



In this Feb. 8, 2021, file photo, Florida seniors have their temperatures taken before receiving the second dose of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine at Jackson Health System in Miami. About three-quarters of all first-dose shots in Florida have gone to those 65 years or older. (AP Photo/Marta Lavandier, File)

"I'm not home free yet, but I feel in a lot better shape," LaBumbard said. She has yet to change her cautious behavior but is making plans to do so and couldn't be happier about it. Being able to go out with friends again seems "just an absolute miracle."

"It's so wonderful to realize that we can be back to normal or something like it."

She's especially happy to be able to worship in person at her church,

where she will return Sunday after taking part via Zoom for months. She had to give up volunteering at a hospital and getting coffee and dinner with friends, but she especially missed her family.

"I was alone at Thanksgiving. I was with just one of my sons for Christmas. Especially when you get to my age ... I feel young, but you don't know, this could be my last Christmas," she said, adding that she's pleased with Michigan's vaccine distribution. "It seems to me that they have done a fantastic job up here. They had everything so well organized."



A healthcare worker prepares to administer the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine Thursday, Feb. 11, 2021, at PNC Arena in Raleigh, N.C. Two months after the first COVID-19 shots were administered, the race to vaccinate older Americans is gaining traction, with more than half of states reporting that a third of people

65 and up have received their first dose. (AP Photo/Gerry Broome)

It's a different story in North Carolina's rural Warren County, where Leticia Bonilla has been frustrated by an inability to make a vaccine appointment locally and would prefer not to wait in line at a mass vaccine clinic in another county.

The 66-year-old retired teacher said the nurse at her doctor's office offered to help her get on a waiting list, but she declined because it felt too uncertain.

"I said, 'Well, how long is the list?' She said, 'I don't know. We don't have any vaccines yet.' And I said, 'Well, why would I put my name there?' ... And I just hung up," Bonilla said.

North Carolina's vaccine distribution process runs through a decentralized system that enables county health departments and vaccine providers to develop their own processes for making vaccine appointments.

Lynn Bender and her husband, Mark Bender, both 70, got their second vaccine dose two weeks ago. The couple are from Monroe Township, New Jersey, but for about 10 weeks a year, they live in a retirement community in Coconut Creek, Florida, that Broward County used for a test rollout. They got to be part of it, and they are happy to be surrounded by people who are also vaccinated.





In this Jan. 21, 2021, file photo, a nurse administers a COVID-19 vaccination at the new distribution hub at North Side Baptist Church in Weatherford, Texas. Two months after the first COVID-19 shots were administered, the race to vaccinate older Americans is gaining traction, with more than half of states reporting that a third of people 65 and up have received their first dose. (Yffy Yossifor/Star-Telegram via AP, File)



In this Jan. 19, 2021, file photo, Robert Owens, 90, stands in line with other residents to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine at John Knox Village in Pompano Beach, Fla. About three-quarters of all first-dose shots in Florida have gone to those 65 years or older. (AP Photo/Lynne Sladky, File)



In this Jan. 20, 2021, file photo, people that received a COVID-19 vaccine socially distance as they wait the required fifteen minutes to monitor for adverse reactions after getting the shot at the Dallas County mass vaccination site at Fair Park in Dallas. Two months after the first COVID-19 shots were administered, the race to vaccinate older Americans is gaining traction, with more than half of states reporting that a third of people 65 and up have received their first dose. (AP Photo/LM Otero)

"It makes it very nice that at least when you feel safe you have somebody to be safe with," Lynn Bender said. "We're to the point now that we can socialize with somebody, play cards or mahjong."

They have especially missed attending art and craft fairs and supporting artists and artisans around the country throughout the year, something

they are looking forward to doing when they can let their guard down further.

"We really haven't changed much, everybody's still being cautious," she said. "But as one of my friends says, knowing you're not going to die makes you feel better."

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