

Free rides, beer and savings bonds: Vaccinators get creative

April 29 2021, by Carla K. Johnson and Michelle R. Smith



In this Monday, April 12, 2021 file photo, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio delivers remarks in Times Square after he toured the grand opening of a Broadway COVID-19 vaccination site intended to jump-start the city's entertainment industry, in New York. Blasio expects the city to "fully reopen" by July 1, with the lifting of the city's COVID-19 restrictions. He told MSNBC the city will be ready for stores, offices and theaters to open at full strength. He cited improved COVID-19 vaccination rates and decreasing hospitalization rates. (AP Photo/Richard Drew, File)

Free beer, pot and doughnuts. Savings bonds. A chance to win an all-terrain vehicle. Places around the U.S. are offering incentives to try to energize the nation's slowing vaccination drive and get Americans to roll up their sleeves.

These relatively small corporate promotion efforts have been accompanied by more serious and far-reaching attempts by officials in cities such as Detroit, where they're offering \$50 to people who give others a ride to vaccination sites.

Public health officials say the efforts are crucial to reach people who haven't been vaccinated yet, whether because they are hesitant or because they have had trouble making an appointment or getting to a vaccination site.

"This is the way we put this pandemic in the rearview mirror and move on with our lives," said Dr. Steven Stack, Kentucky's public health commissioner.

Demand for vaccines has started to fall around the country—something public health officials had anticipated would happen once the most vulnerable and most eager to get vaccinated had the opportunity to do so. Now that most older Americans are fully vaccinated, the effort is moving into a new phase.

"This will be much more of an intense ground game where we have to focus on smaller events, more tailored to address the needs and concerns of focused communities who have different sensitivities and different needs," Stack said.

Demand has dropped precipitously in the rugged timberland of

northeastern Washington state, where Matt Schanz of Northeast Tri County Health District is at a loss for what to try next.

Seventy-six percent of residents remain unvaccinated in Pend Oreille County, and 78% in Ferry County, and a whopping 80% in Stevens County have not had even one shot, compared with a statewide average of 59%. On Wednesday, only 35 people in all three counties booked a first dose through the health agency, down from a peak of 500 daily appointments a few weeks ago.

Schanz ticks off the efforts so far in the three counties where he is the department's administrator: Newspaper ads, signs and mailers sent with utility bills. Drive-thru vaccination sites at fairgrounds and fire stations. A call center and online scheduling. Outreach to church pastors. Outreach to employers in the lumber industry and an aluminum boat manufacturer. Outreach to Republican elected leaders. TV and radio interviews.

"Have we reached that point of saturation?" Schanz asked. "How many people do we have who are going to be the hard no's, and how many are the hesitators and the wait-and-see folks?"

Uncertainty about the vaccine is the biggest barrier, Schanz said: "People say, 'Geez, I don't want to be a government experiment.'"

Cases are starting to climb again, and Schanz wonders if it will take people falling sick to revive interest in vaccines.

"It's a 'here we go again' kind of feeling," he said of the case numbers. "Vaccines were our hope of breaking that cycle."

Several companies have announced that employees can take paid time off to get vaccinated.

In Houston, 31-year-old Elissa Hanc works for one of those companies, 3 Men Movers in Houston.

"It made getting the vaccine far more accessible," Hanc said. "It wasn't necessary to make a choice between work and protecting myself, my family and my community."

Her employer started offering the benefit before President Joe Biden announced a tax credit for small businesses to provide paid time off for those getting vaccinated or recovering from side effects.

Hanc got the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine April 6. She felt hot and achy the next day, and her supervisor, who noticed during a Zoom call that Hanc didn't look her best, told her to take the day off. Hanc appreciated that too.

"I have a few friends who work where management is not making it a priority to get the vaccine," Hanc said. "They've let me know in no uncertain terms how lucky I am to work where I do."

Dr. Eric Topol, head of the Scripps Research Translational Institute, said that employers should give paid time off and that other incentives are needed to boost vaccinations. He pointed to West Virginia, which is giving \$100 savings bonds to young adults who get their shot.

"We also need health systems and universities to mandate vaccination—that no one can be employed or on campus/medical facilities without having been vaccinated," Topol said in an email. He also said the nation needs to mount a "counteroffensive" against anti-vaccination websites and activists.

Other companies are getting into the spirit with marketing pitches.

Krispy Kreme began offering a free doughnut a day to anyone showing proof of having been vaccinated. In Cleveland, a movie theater is supplying free popcorn through the end of this month.

Several marijuana dispensaries around the country are giving out cannabis treats or free rolled joints. On April 20, marijuana advocates offered "joints for jabs" to encourage people to get vaccinated in New York City and Washington.

Some breweries around the country are offering "shots and a chaser."

In Alaska, which traditionally has low vaccine confidence, the Norton Sound Health Corp., with a hospital in Nome and 15 clinics across western Alaska, has given away prizes, including airline tickets, money toward the purchase of an all-terrain vehicle, and \$500 for groceries or fuel.

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Citation: Free rides, beer and savings bonds: Vaccinators get creative (2021, April 29) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-04-free-beer-bonds-vaccinators-creative.html>

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