

'You can feel the joy': One nurse's race to vaccinate as many people as she can

April 28 2021, by Chris Serres, Star Tribune



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Chris Runyon paused for a moment to catch her breath as she lugged a high-tech cooler and 20 pounds of medical supplies through an empty gymnasium.

It was late on a Friday afternoon and Runyon, a 71-year-old public health nurse, had just finished a community vaccination clinic in south Minneapolis and was racing against the clock. Minutes earlier, she had punctured the seal on a vial of the Pfizer coronavirus [vaccine](#), and now had just six hours to inject the vaccines into arms before the doses expired and had to be thrown out.

Frantic, Runyon made a flurry of calls to relatives and acquaintances, directing them to the home in St. Paul where she was babysitting her infant granddaughter that evening. By 6 p.m., people began arriving at her doorstep ready for the shots. With only a couple of hours to spare, Runyon gave the last dose to a middle-aged stranger in the middle of a kitchen with medical supplies spread over a counter.

"It's like we're all on the Titanic and trying to get everyone we can on the lifeboats as fast as we possibly can," said Runyon, who works for Hennepin Healthcare.

Runyon is among hundreds of Minnesotans with medical backgrounds who have stepped forward to administer vaccines as the state ramps up efforts to get as many people as possible inoculated against the coronavirus. As the vaccine supply has increased, so has the demand for people to deliver the shots. Since January, nearly 850 Minnesota healthcare professionals—from pharmacists and paramedics to optometrists and veterinarians—have volunteered to become COVID-19 vaccinators through a program with the state Department of Health, officials said.

For many, administering the vaccine has become a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to save lives and spread hope after a year of despair. Nurses who months ago were traumatized by watching people die from COVID-19 are now experiencing relief and joy. For their efforts, they are rewarded with tears of gratitude, celebratory fist bumps and the

flashing of smartphone cameras as people seek to capture the moment for their families and social media.

"You can feel the joy," Runyon said after a long day of giving shots to restaurant and hotel workers at a union hall in Minneapolis. "People truly feel like their lives have opened up after the shots."

Yet plunging needles into strangers' bare arms, day after day, is a daunting task.

First, there is the challenge of getting the right amount of doses to each community vaccination site with all the necessary supplies—multiple syringes, alcohol wipes, bandages, cotton balls, sharps containers and piles of vaccination cards. Then there is the delicate process of sliding the needles into thimble-sized vials of vaccine without contaminating the doses. And the hours of repetitive jabbing and pulling up shirtsleeves can wear on the joints—many vaccinators do stretching exercises to maintain dexterity in their hands.

But even with meticulous planning, things can go awry.

On rare occasions, people get dizzy and faint. Syringes break. Supplies run out. And some who sign up for vaccine appointments sometimes fail to show, making it difficult for COVID-19 vaccinators to pace the shots correctly.

Oftentimes, they are left with unused doses of the precious medicine at the end of a clinic and must scramble to find people ready and willing to get a shot before the vaccines expire. Once vials of the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines are punctured, the doses are only viable for six hours before they have to be discarded.

"We are in the fight of our lives for our communities, so it's absolutely

critical that we get this right," said Stephanie Graves, maternal and child health coordinator in the Minneapolis Health Department, who has been assisting with the oversight of vaccine clinics.

Runyon, a nurse for the past 50 years, estimates that she has given shots to at least 2,500 people since late December, when the vaccines became available.

She has watched elderly recipients break down and cry tears of joy after realizing they would finally be able to see their grandchildren after a year of isolation. Others have asked her to pose for photographs or to help them set up a video feed so their family can witness the shot. Appreciative vaccine recipients have sent her thank you cards, wine and boxes of chocolate.

At times, Runyon must help people overcome their fear of needles or anxiety over possible side effects. She calmly explains that suffering side effects is a positive sign that one's body is building an immune response. Most look away or close their eyes as she plunges the needle about three fingers below their deltoid muscle. When shirts are removed, Runyon will sometimes lay her sweater over a woman's bare shoulders before inserting the shot.

"I'd rather take 100 pills than have one needle stuck in my arm!" declared Dwight Stewart, a 56-year-old hotel worker, as he tentatively approached Runyon for his first dose. "But I know this will give me a little more protection."

Still, the burden of delivering hundreds of shots each day weighs on Runyon and other vaccinators.

As a veteran vaccinator, Runyon is often called upon to transport the bulky, ultracold cooler that contains the precious doses to community

vaccination clinics. The responsibility entails checking the cooler's temperature every hour and ensuring it's always within sight. There have been nights when Runyon woke in panic, dreaming that she has lost the vaccines or forgotten to check the temperature on the cooler.

"After awhile, the [vaccine cooler] becomes part of you," she said. "It's like taking care of a baby."

Early on, Runyon said it was easier to plan doses for vaccination clinics. That's because nearly everyone who signed up for a vaccine appointment would show up. Often, there were lines of people waiting for any leftover doses.

But now, many of those who were highly motivated to get the shots because of elevated health risks have been inoculated, leaving those who are more vaccine-hesitant. And as [vaccine supply](#) has grown, people have started to become more selective about what type of vaccine they get—contributing to no-shows for appointments, Runyon said.

More than 2.3 million people, or 53% of eligible Minnesotans, have received at least one dose of the vaccines, and 1.7 million have received both doses, according to a state dashboard.

"As we get further along, it's getting a lot more stressful and difficult to find willing vaccine recipients," Runyon said. "It bothers me to think we may get to a point where I may not be able to get all these doses into people's arms."

Recently, there have been days when Runyon will be left with a half-dozen unused shots at the end of a community vaccination event. Determined not to let any shots go to waste, she has turned her dining room into a makeshift clinic with all the necessary supplies ready to go.

On days when she has leftover doses, she calls people on her smartphone list whom she knows need to be immunized. Neighbors, acquaintances and relatives have all shown up at a moment's notice, she said.

"I sometimes wonder what my neighbors think about all these people coming and going," she said, laughing. "But I never want to waste a single dose. Ever."

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Citation: 'You can feel the joy': One nurse's race to vaccinate as many people as she can (2021, April 28) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-04-joy-nurse-vaccinate-people.html>

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