

Florida parents scramble to find COVID vaccines for infants, toddlers

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It's been almost two weeks since federal regulators authorized COVID-19 vaccines for infants and preschoolers, but Katie Old Crow still hasn't been able to get her 14-month-old son vaccinated.

The Town 'N Country, Florida, mother is waiting for her family's pediatrician to vaccinate her son, Rollin, because most pharmacies only offer shots to kids ages 3 and older.

Her pediatrician's office on June 21 told her and other [parents](#) that they expected the child-sized doses to become available "within the next few weeks" and would email parents once the shots arrived.

But Old Crow said she hasn't heard anything since last week. She wonders if the long wait is the result of Florida's decision against preordering vaccines for [children](#) under age 5.

"It's disappointing because we've been waiting for two years," she said.

Florida was the only state in the nation that did not preorder the newly authorized [vaccine](#) for children ages 4 and younger. That's because the Florida surgeon general recommended that healthy children need not be vaccinated against COVID-19, contrary to guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It has left the state with a confusing patchwork of vaccine providers that some parents are struggling to navigate.

Retail giants Walmart and Walgreens are giving out the shot—but only to children ages 3 and up. CVS MinuteClinic locations will vaccinate children ages 18 months and older. But Publix, a major player in Florida's COVID-19 vaccine rollout, is not offering doses to kids younger than 5.

Florida's vaccine stance also means neither patients nor doctors can obtain doses through county health departments as they did for older children. In a briefing to a congressional subcommittee Tuesday, Florida Surgeon General Joseph Lapado said that will affect about 33,000 children ages 4 and under who receive primary care at those facilities.

That has parents frustrated and confused, said Rosana Lastra, a pediatrician at Head2Toe Pediatrics in St. Petersburg. It's toughest for parents of children between 6 and 18 months.

"A lot of families have been having difficulties finding places where they can get (their child) vaccinated," she said.

Lastra was so concerned she decided her clinic would offer doses of the vaccine to any family that needs them—not just her patients. She set up a drive-thru vaccination site and has already helped families who found out about her on social media or through the local health department.

Health officials are referring families to "federally qualified health centers," clinics typically run by nonprofits that receive [federal money](#) to subsidize [medical bills](#) for lower income families.

But one of Hillsborough County's main providers, Tampa Family Health Centers, is still waiting on a shipment of 800 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine from the federal government, said Chief Medical Officer Ashley McPhie.

"We're just at the mercy of their shipping," she said.

McPhie hopes her group can begin giving children shots by next week. The nonprofit plans to offer the vaccine at eight of its 16 clinics, she said, adding that it has been confusing for parents.

The vaccine will be available to their patients and to any family that needs it. "We don't turn anyone away," she said.

But that is not the case at Evara Health, a federally qualified health center operating 14 clinics throughout Pinellas County.

It has received vaccine doses but only plans to make them available to existing patients, said Chief Medical Officer Nichelle Threadgill.

Old Crow, the Town 'N Country mother, also has a 3-year-old daughter, Vivienne, that she may get vaccinated at a pharmacy. But she'd rather have both Vivienne and her 14-month-old son get shots during a single trip to their pediatrician's office.

"That's just more convenient," she said.

Erin Lehnen, a St. Petersburg mother, wants to get her 2-year-old daughter Grey vaccinated at a pediatrician's office, too.

But Lehnen called this week and couldn't get information about the office's vaccine plans. Lehnen doesn't know if they ordered doses.

"Maybe they're just as in the dark as we are," she said.

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