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COVID vaccinations scarce this fall

Supply short as pipeline becomes commercial

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USA TODAY

Americans eager to get the updated COVID-19 vaccine in September were disappointed when they began looking for doses.

Some pharmacies weren't posting enough appointments. Others didn't have enough vaccines. Most hospitals and clinics hadn't gotten their shipments yet.

During the three years the virus was considered a public health emergency, the government was paying for and distributing the shots.

Now that the emergency phase has ended, COVID-19 vaccine distribution has become a commercial enterprise – and problems persist more than a month after the vaccine's approval.

For manufacturers, it's mostly business as usual. Industry experts say the problems have arisen in other stages of the process – with wholesalers and distributors, pharmacies and insurance companies.

The White House reports more than 7million Americans vaccinated with the updated vaccine as of last week – but the growing pains are far from over.

'The COVID infrastructure is still a question mark,' said Prashant Yadav, a medical supply chain expert and senior fellow at the Center for Global Development.

Pharmacists at chains like CVS and Walgreens have had little control over the barrage of appointments their employers set up since the first rollout in 2020.

After weeks of administering the fall 2023 vaccines with little reprieve, pharmacists staged a walkout.

The companies responded by promising additional staffing, agreeing to pay overtime and allowing employees to control when they're expected to cover vaccination appointments.

The upshot of those improvements was a significant drop in the number of appointments available on any given day, right as vaccination season began ramping up, said Karen Winslow, a grant supervisor and the former interim executive director at Virginia Pharmacy Association.

In addition to the updated COVID-19 vaccine, federal regulators also recently approved and recommended a new RSV vaccine for older Americans.

All these things happening at once, Winslow said, makes it a 'perfect storm.'

As patients struggled to find appointments at chain pharmacies, others turned to local hospitals, community health clinics and independent pharmacies. But they didn't have vaccines on hand.

Providers at some facilities said they've just begun receiving their first shipments of vaccine, while others say they're still waiting or have been unable to order shots altogether.

By mid-October, Dr. Luisa Perez, a provider for the nonprofit SOMOS Community Care, didn't know what to tell patients: 'I have not been able to get any vaccines for COVID or know when it's going to be given to us.'

SOMOS providers who have tried to access COVID-19 vaccines through typical commercial channels have been told by wholesalers there are no shots available, Perez said.

One problem is that wholesalers and distributors prioritized larger accounts with chain pharmacies, such as Walgreens and CVS, industry experts said.

'When the market mechanism takes over ... bigger accounts get priority,' Yadav said.

Unlike in the first years of the public health emergency, when the government paid for and distributed COVID-19 vaccines, private companies are now shouldering the costs.

Wholesalers purchase vaccines, pharmacies buy them, and insurance companies reimburse the pharmacies once the vaccines have been administered.

Unfortunately, the cash flow hasn't been as seamless as the companies involved had hoped.

'In many cases, pharmacies are getting underpaid (by insurance companies) for the vaccine or won't be paid for a matter of months,' said Amanda Applegate, director of practice development at the Kansas Pharmacists Association.

The limited cash flow has forced pharmacies to be conservative when ordering vaccines from wholesalers, industry experts say, which is why some pharmacies had limited doses despite the high demand at the beginning of the season.

Many of those who expressed frustrations in the first few weeks of the rollout about not being able to secure vaccine appointments where and when they wanted were among the healthiest and most technologically savvy consumers around – the people who immediately took note of the backlog.

Industry experts said those who really suffer are residents living in marginalized communities.

These are the patients that Perez sees at her SOMOS facility in the Bronx: people who are underinsured or uninsured, don't speak English, work multiple jobs and can't navigate the health system with as much ease as their mostly white and affluent counterparts.

'When I tell them to go to a pharmacy like Walgreens, they look at me like I just grew another head,' she said. 'What do you mean?' 'Do I have to give them my information?' 'I don't know them.' 'Do they speak Spanish?' they ask.

Government outreach efforts include the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Bridge Access Program, a temporary partnership with state and local health departments and other points of care to expand vaccine access for uninsured and underinsured Americans.

But critics are skeptical that vulnerable people will actually benefit, as the program partners with the same chain pharmacies – Walgreens and CVS – that are already strained by the growing demand and that Perez's patients seem hesitant to visit.

Industry experts warn consumers to expect more problems to pop up this season.

Yadav said it took decades for the commercial market to perfect the flu vaccine rollout each year.

'It will take some time before the COVID vaccine market will operate like the flu vaccine market,' he said. 'It's still in its infancy.'

Health and patient safety coverage at USA TODAY is made possible in part by a grant from the Masimo Foundation for Ethics, Innovation and Competition in Healthcare. The Masimo Foundation does not provide editorial input.

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