

Local chain has given more than 32,000 doses

**By MICHAEL ROKNICK Herald Business Editor
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Bretton Walberg, owner of the regional Walberg Family Pharmacy chain, prepares a COVID-19 shot at a clinic held a couple weeks ago. Since vaccines became available last month. In all the pharmacy has given over 32,000 vaccine shots. MICHAEL ROKNICK | Herald

After preparing yet another vaccine shot, Bretton Walberg took a deep breath and rubbed his bloodshot eyes.

“I’m OK,” Walberg tells one of the 2,000 people who had waited in line this day to get their COVID-19 vaccination. “We got a lot more to go.”

As the owner of Walberg Family Pharmacies, he wants to be at all of the company’s vaccine clinics. In all, the business has held 24 vaccination clinics and has administered more than 32,000 injections.

On this day, the clinic site it was Grace Chapel Community Church in Hermitage.

In the church’s parking lot several volunteer attendants directed drivers to open spaces. From there signs outside and inside the church pointed people to where the line forms. And then there were volunteer helpers to answer questions.

A dozen Walberg Pharmacy employees volunteered their time for this clinic.

“We couldn’t have done this without them,” Walberg said. “I’m very proud of our organization.”

In the mid-1980s, Bretton’s parents owned and operated two pharmacies during his childhood. He and his wife Stacey cranked up the Jamestown-based business, which now has 11 regional locations.

But no amount of experience could have prepared the pharmaceutical industry for the COVID-19 onslaught.

Science dictates that eventually a severe disease like COVID-19 would inflict its wrath on the world’s population, Walberg said. But the coronavirus showed that humans won’t always be prepared.

“I think everybody would agree that we as a community, a state, a nation, a world would ever have thought, never have dreamed of a pandemic like this,” Walberg said. “This is something that has been very, very difficult for all of us.”

It became clear early on that the science dealing with the coronavirus was constantly shifting. Changes in medical protocols could be measured in hours.

“Every hospital, pharmacy and doctors’ office got rules and regulations that were changing at such a rapid pace nobody really knew how to react or respond,” Walberg said. “I think everybody was doing their best – whether they were right or wrong, I don’t think anyone can judge.”

He often cajoles others to get vaccinated not only to benefit themselves, but the rest of the community. The idea is to create “herd immunity.” The term describes that a population can become immune to an infectious disease through previous infection or by vaccination, limiting the virus’s ability to find new people to spread to.

The safest path to herd immunity is by vaccination. But to be effective, at least 70 percent of the population must be immunized, Walberg said.

Enough vaccine doses can be created to hit that 70 percent mark and higher – if people are willing to take the shot.

“We can get there if we all work together,” Walberg said.

The pharmacy has an 8 a.m. clinic this morning at Valley Baptist Church in Farrell but all the vaccination appointments already have been taken.

He also has grave concerns that those who have been vaccinated will ditch their masks and halt social distancing.

“The vaccine doesn’t give you a golden ticket where you can take your mask off and forget about it forever. You still need to wear a mask in the grocery store,” Walberg said. “I expect the vaccine will prevent people from dying. But it doesn’t prevent you from spreading the coronavirus.”

Finding a reason to get vaccinated isn’t hard, he said.

“I don’t think there’s a single person who doesn’t know somebody that passed away from this,” Walberg said.