

OUTLOOK 2021: Miracle in a vial; Hundreds line up for a shot at beating the virus; supply uncertainty an issue

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By MICHAEL ROKNICK Herald Business Editor

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MICHAEL ROKNICK | HeraldPharmacy owner Bretton Walberg breaks the news to a Greenville man that there wouldn't be a dose of the COVID-19 vaccine left for him. Walberg laments the frustration of sometimes having extra, perishable doses at some clinics while most of the time receiving far too little supply.

HERMITAGE – Bretton Walberg couldn't hide the hurt as he looked up at the 69-year-old man, who was a generation older than him.

"I'm sorry, sir," Walberg told the man, who standing across the table from him last Saturday in the lobby of Grace Chapel Community Church's in Hermitage. "We don't have any extra vaccines today."

The Greenville senior citizen, who didn't want to give his name, walked away with a glum look.

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"I really was checking in here for my wife," the man said. "She has a lot of health problems."

Such realities of turning away people for a vaccine are seen nationwide.

This has happened at other clinics hosted by Walberg, who along with his wife, Stacey, own the regional chain of 11 Walberg Family Pharmacies, including five in Mercer County.

"I know this isn't a positive scenario," Walberg said of the huge vaccine demand with limited supplies. "But we want to help."



MICHAEL ROKNICK | HeraldVehicles, sometimes 15 deep, lined up on Lamor Road in Hermitage a week ago Saturday waiting to turn into Grace Chapel Community Church, where COVID-19 vaccine was being administered.

There are slip-ups in the vaccine supply chain or those who got vaccinated elsewhere, leaving extra doses at another clinic. Two weeks ago, the Walbergs found themselves with dozens of extra doses.

Although this sounds great for those seeking to get vaccinated, it generates stress among healthcare providers. Both the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines must be that they be used within a certain time limit after being thawed from about minus 158 degrees Fahrenheit. If not, they must be tossed. That means the chance of potentially saving someone from getting coronavirus is lost.

With excess on hand two weeks ago, Walberg employees contacted a Greenville church to see if they could quickly assemble those still eligible for a vaccine shot. Within an hour, members of the first group of a mostly older crowd were rolling up their sleeves for a shot. Surplus wasn't the problem last Saturday.

“We could have used 2,000 vaccines today,” Walberg said. “But all we were given was 500. We don’t know day to day how many we will have.”

Retiree Paul Ciotti drove from his Erie home after being notified he was registered to get an injection where vaccines were available. His age, along with being a Type 2 diabetic, placed him higher on the list.

“My wife can’t wait to get hers,” Ciotti said of the vaccination. Several of his friends were infected with COVID-19.

“But they did good,” he said.



MICHAEL ROKNICK | HeraldPaul Ciottio drive to Hermitage from Erie to receive a dose of the COVID-19 vaccine during a clinic last Saturday at Grace Chapel Community Church in Hermitage. About 500 shots were administered, but there was enough public demand for four times that amount if it had been available.

Regardless, Ciotti said he strictly follows coronavaris guidelines.

“I always wear a mask wherever I go,” he said. “You shouldn’t be allowed to be in a grocery stores without wearing a mask.”

Stories abound nationwide about breakdowns in the system causing 12-hour waits or longer for patients. On this day vaccines at the church were given like clockwork. Those to be vaccinated were given specific arrival times.

“People coming on time have a lot to do with it,” said Kaylee Lewis, a pharmacists at Walberg’s Hempfield Township store.

That made Ciotti happy, too, as he arrived on the dot for his shot.

“I only had to wait a few minutes,” he said.