

Pennsylvania cutting vaccine to community pharmacies

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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. In all the pharmacy has given over 37,000 vaccine shots.

A state change that limits the pharmacies that will get doses of the COVID-19 vaccine could shut out a family-owned regional chain based in Jamestown that has administered close to 37,000 doses of the vaccine in eight weeks.

The state Department of Health announced it will allocate doses of the COVID-19 vaccine to only two large pharmacy chains, Giant Eagle and Rite Aid.

That means community pharmacies, including chain and independent suppliers, as well as hospitals and health departments, will no longer receive COVID-19 immunization doses.

Walberg Family Pharmacies of Jamestown, which owns 11 stores in Mercer, Lawrence, Butler, Crawford and Clarion counties, appears to be on the list of community pharmacies being cut off from the vaccine supply.

“It’s frustrating for us,” said Bretton Walberg, owner of the pharmacies. “Not only for me, but for the volunteers. My volunteers saw firsthand the elation of people getting the vaccine. Everyone is horrified.”

Walberg has held multiple COVID-19 vaccination clinics at locations throughout in northwestern Pennsylvania since early February including clinics in Meadville Feb. 15 and March 8 and in the Conneaut Lake area March 1 and Monday.

Walberg said that all of his locations received a letter from the health department stating that they have selected the top 300 providers in the state based upon their ability to get the vaccine out and to spread it equitably.

“At this point, we don’t know. I could get doses in tomorrow,” Walberg said. “But it looks like they will take the vaccine away.”

Meadville Medical Center has been notified it will continue to be a vaccine provider, Don Rhoten, the hospital's vice president of consumer engagement, said Monday.

“MMC was notified on March 18 that the hospital will continue to receive vaccine allocations, as one of 300 providers in the commonwealth who have demonstrated the ability to get as many individuals vaccinated as quickly and equitably as possible,” Rhoten said in an email to the Tribune. “We encourage individuals to continue checking the MMC website, www.mmchs.org – for updates on upcoming vaccine clinics.”

Walberg said he has tried to reach officials at the Department of Health. He twice called the office of Acting Health Secretary Alison Beam, with a promise of a response in 24 hours, to no avail.

“I would tell anybody who is disappointed with the decision of the state to call them and tell them what your thoughts are,” Walberg said.

Walberg believes their practice has been to spread the vaccine equitably.

“We’ve been able to reach every sector,” Walberg said.

Walberg said his pharmacies have reached people both with and without access to the internet by partnering with other agencies.

That includes collaboration with the Mercer County Area on Aging, Meadville Medical Center and Allegheny Health Network to help vaccinate patients. Walberg said the chain has administered the vaccine through walk-in and drive-through clinics and through waiting lists kept at their stores.

“There’s nothing that we haven’t tried,” Walberg said. “If you want to talk about fair and equitable, that’s what we’re doing.”

The pharmacy chain has administered the vaccines at its stores, bringing in an extra pharmacist to cover the day-to-day duties because at pharmacies in Pennsylvania, pharmacists must administer vaccines.

By giving the vaccines to Rite Aid and Giant Eagle only, Walberg believes the state is making a big mistake.

“They’re asking for more mistakes,” Walberg said. “They’re giving 30 to 60 shots a day while doing their regular duties.”

Walberg said there are many reasons why sending his patients to Rite Aid or Giant Eagle to get vaccinated makes “no sense at all.”

“They would get inundated,” he said. “I don’t know how they can do it without putting additional stress on the pharmacist.”

In addition, people who may already have trust issues about getting the vaccine may be even less trusting with a larger provider.

“The people who come to our pharmacies come to our pharmacies because they don’t like big organizations,” Walberg said. “We’re taking care of mostly senior citizens. They know us. They trust us. To throw them into another provider ...”

If Walberg pharmacies have administered their last vaccinations, Walberg said he is proud of what his staff and volunteers have been able to accomplish with the help of their partnerships.

“We want to thank the community for putting their trust in our organizations,” Walberg said. “We’re proud of our volunteers, of everybody who makes this work.”

He said he does not know what more the community pharmacies would have to do to prove that they’re giving out the vaccine fairly and equitably.

He cited a pharmacy in Westmoreland County that vaccinated close to 33,000 people and scheduled clinics through the end of April.

“There’s two independent pharmacy groups (including Walberg) giving almost 70,000 vaccinations, and the state doesn’t think we’re doing a good job,” Walberg said. “It just does not make any sense. I don’t know what else to do.”

Walberg believes that the state health department's decision is purely political and that, as usual, the community pharmacies are getting the short end of the stick.

“How dare the state get involved to say where people must go for immunizations,” Walberg said. “It’s all about protecting our community. And I think it’s an absolute shame.”

Melissa Klaric writes for The (Sharon) Herald, which, like The Meadville Tribune, is owned by CNHI. Meadville Tribune reporter Keith Gushard contributed to this report.