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how did they do it?

Walberg credits flexibility of independent pharmacy; teams of employees and volunteers for delivering 37K vaccines

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By CALEB STRIGHT



Retired and active medical professionals (from left) Marcie Tulip, Bretton Walberg, Janet Segall, Russ Lauffer and Randy Clark load syringes with Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine Thursday at Thiel College's Passavant Center. Photos by Caleb Stright/R-A

On Jan. 22, when Bretton Walberg received his first shipment of 2,000 COVID-19 vaccines, he admits he knew very little about putting together a mass vaccination clinic. But that next day, his Walberg Family Pharmacies team vaccinated 1,000 people in Greenville.

That was 36,000 shots ago.

How's he done it?

Being able to be nimble and flexible is key, he said. As an independent pharmacy chain, he can move and adapt quickly.

There's that and what people call his well-oiled machine — a team of flexible, paid employees and motivated volunteers.

"I look out here, and I see my father-in-law, mother-in-law, sister-in-law, sister-in-law," Walberg said at Thursday's clinic at Thiel College's Passavant Center.

Family – including his wife, Stacey, who is a big part of the operation, and their two sons – is an important component, but needing a large number of people trained in medicine, he's had retired doctors, nurses and pharmacists reach out to offer a hand.



Walberg Family Pharmacies owner Bretton Walberg holds up a vial of Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine Thursday at an event at Thiel College's Passavant Center.

"You need help, we'll come help," said Dr. Janet Segall, who worked for 27 years in Greenville as an OB/GYN. She's one of many true, unpaid volunteers, offering their time and expertise to vaccinate their neighbors.

"I want to see people vaccinated," she said. "I want people to stay healthy and for life to get back to normal."

"I'm here because we have a big need for immunizations," said Sam Dailey, a retired, longtime local pharmacist. "And no one wants to be wearing a mask, do they?"

Some of the retired and current professionals are administering shots, others are filling syringes – which is one way that Walberg's nimbleness and flexibility comes in handy.

Call him the Henry Ford of vaccinations, but instead of an assembly line for Model Ts, Walberg's got the vaccination process down to a series of stations.

At Thiel College's Passavant Center Thursday, he had a table set up out front, where patients were greeted by friendly faces in blue Walberg shirts and could sign in and print out their paperwork; they'd walk down the aisle of the auditorium like so many local graduates before, where employees and volunteers at laptops finished up the pre-shot process; and the patient would then make one last stop, where they get their shot.

Another station patients may not notice is where a big chunk of the innovation comes in.



Retired pharmacist Sam Dailey delivers a vaccine Thursday during a Walberg Family Pharmacies event at Thiel College's Passavant Center. He's one of several retired medical professionals lending a hand to the Walberg effort.

Policies at many larger, corporate hospitals and pharmacies require that the vaccine be used within minutes of being drawn from its vial. Shot maker Pfizer's guidance, though, is that it's good for six hours.

So, Walberg has a station where a second set of trained medical professionals and retirees load the syringes. That leaves one less thing for the eight to 12 people giving the shots to do and speeds up the process. It's especially helpful to meet the rush once a vaccination event opens its doors.

Team members get there an hour or more before the doors open to fill syringes. For Thursday's clinic – during which Team Walberg administered more than 1,500 shots – they had 375 syringes ready to go before the first patient walked in.



Valerie Kaltenbaugh (right) with Walberg Family Pharmacies gets Darren Miller, of Hermitage, set up for his COVID-19 vaccination Thursday at Thiel College's Passavant Center. Photos by Caleb Stright/R-A

Kylee Lewis, Walberg's clinical care coordinator, said preloading syringes has been an important key to the volume they're tackling. While other places are vaccinating a couple hundred per week, the Walberg team is vaccinating thousands per event.

“And it’s something we can scale up and down, if we need to,” said Matt Shellenbarger, Walberg director of pharmacy operations.

In addition to the volunteers, Walberg credits dedicated, flexible employees, many of whom come in on days off because they care so much about the work.

“I think it’s rewarding for them,” Stacey Walberg said of the chance to help people connect with a lifesaving vaccine. “It’s not something you see every day.”

But Walberg and his family, too, are putting in extra hours. On top of the everyday work of running 11 pharmacies, they’re putting in long days running clinics, on weekdays and weekends.



People walk toward the entrance of Thiel College’s Passavant Center where Walberg Family Pharmacies was holding a vaccination clinic Thursday.

In addition to leading a growing company and organizing the logistics of multiple clinics per week, Walberg spends a lot of his time at the events filling syringes and greeting patients as they find their way from station to station.

Although it’s been a long few weeks, he wasn’t complaining Thursday.

“It’s part of being a businessperson — you don’t have a lot of days off,” he said. “And I love what I do. When I go home at night, I’m not sitting down and watching TV, I’m reading about pharmacy stuff.”

Another step that he’s taken that a corporate operation likely wouldn’t, is that for the 37,000 shots delivered so far at clinics, he hasn’t been reimbursed.

The data on the vaccinations has been submitted to the Pa. Department of Health, but the Walberg team still has a lot of work ahead of it to submit the info needed for reimbursement.

“We just want to get shots in people’s arms here,” he said. “We just want to get them in and out.”

Thursday’s event was Walberg’s last first-shot clinic for the time being.

Although the team has administered roughly 37,000 shots over a little more than nine weeks, the state announced last week that it would no longer – at least temporarily – be sending doses to most independent pharmacies, like Walberg’s.

It’s a move that Harrisburg says will spread the reach of the vaccine by focusing on roughly 250 larger pharmacies, and speed up its delivery.

The state has faced criticism for the pace of its vaccination effort, and considering Walberg’s success and efficiency, he doesn’t understand why the state wouldn’t let him and his team continue to put their skills, knowledge and experience to use.

Thursday, a woman wheeled her 86-year-old mother, a New Castle resident, to the front of the auditorium and profusely thanked Walberg and his team for their efforts.

“That, right there, is the reason we do this,” he said. “People that don’t have access to the vaccine and need it. It shows you there’s still people out there that need the vaccine.”

While Walberg’s won’t be holding any more firstshot clinics for the time being, anyone that received a first shot through them will be scheduled for a second shot.