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# Assisted living facilities play catch up on vaccines

By James Farrell  
SUN STAFF REPORTER

Allysa Olsen, administrator for the Fox Run at Orchard Park senior care facility, got a call with some good news last Friday.

It was Walgreens, informing her that assisted living and independent living residents would be able to get their Covid-19 vaccines this past Tuesday. For assisted living residents, that was more than a week earlier than their original Feb. 4 clinic date. Independent living residents previously hadn't even had a date scheduled on the calendar.

"Obviously we said, 'yes,' because we want people vaccinated as soon as possible," Olsen said.

"We kind of worked all weekend to make sure we got everything that we needed to."

It was a positive development for those residents, who had initially been left out of the first clinic date on Jan. 15. Those vaccines were only available to the facility's skilled nursing residents. And even that date, Fox Run officials said, was later than they'd initially hoped.

In the earliest days of the vaccination rollout, assisted living facilities were concerned that they were not on the same schedule as nursing

homes, despite both being long-term care facilities housing vulnerable elderly populations.

Nursing homes started to get their vaccination clinics scheduled through the federal Pharmacy Partnership for Long-Term Care Program in late December. But in some states, like New York, assisted living facilities and other adult care facilities couldn't start getting vaccinated until Jan. 11.

And according to Lisa Newcomb, executive director of the Empire State Association of Assisted Living, as of a couple weeks ago, many



Contributed photo

A vaccination clinic was held Tuesday at Fox Run in Orchard Park.

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facilities across the state were seeing clinic dates into February – with some even as late as March. Some hadn't heard from their partner pharmacy at all.

While assisted living facilities may be playing from behind, the tide seems to be turning now, Newcomb said. Vaccinations are underway and efforts to advocate for earlier vaccine dates in assisted living facilities seem to be bearing fruit, with many facilities reporting that their vaccine clinics are being rescheduled to earlier dates.

"It's improved," she said. "We did have to experience that delay up front. So that was disappointing."

The state has set a goal of ensuring that all New York State licensed adult care facilities in the state are vaccinated by Feb. 11, according to Jeffrey Hammond, spokesman for the state's Department of Health.

"The federal program started on Monday, Jan. 11 for adult care facilities, and we are working with all parties involved, including pharmacies, to expedite vaccination," Hammond said.

There are 611 nursing home facilities in part A of the federal program's implementation in New York State and 544 other adult care facilities in part B, according to the state's Department of Health.

At the first vaccination clinic at Fox Run on Tuesday, the facility, through its partner pharmacy Walgreens, administered 290 vaccinations. None were wasted and anyone in the facility that wanted one got one, according to Mary Lou Letina-Land, the director of marketing and sales at Fox Run.

Before the rescheduled clinic date, assisted living residents would have had to wait until Feb. 4 to get their first dose of the two-dose Covid-19 vaccine. Perhaps most pleased by the change in date were Fox Run's independent living residents – who



Contributed photo

Diane Noody, an independent living resident at Fox Run, shows off her vaccination card.

prior to last Friday, hadn't been scheduled to receive a vaccine at all yet.

"Independent living residents were really upset that the health center, which is the assisted living and the skilled nursing, were all getting vaccinated and there was no date for them, no timeline," Letina-Land said. "The ones that want it are really, really excited that they can get it and their families I think are ecstatic that they can get it."

Fox Run wasn't the only local facility that saw its date move up. The Peregrine Senior Living facility in Orchard Park learned that its clinic date had been moved up from Feb. 1 to Jan. 27.

"We're very excited, all of our residents, we have consent forms for them," said facility administrator Catherine Dunlavey. "All the residents are getting them."

Other facilities also noted a lag in getting their clinic dates when compared to nursing homes but were able to get dates in January up front.

As an assisted living facility, Elderwood in West Seneca has gone through similar issues, as it also started getting vaccines later than nursing homes. Chuck Hayes, Elderwood vice president of marketing and communications, said on Jan. 7 that vaccines for the West Seneca

location would come "later this month, perhaps."

He then updated the Sun late last week, saying that Elderwood Assisted Living at West Seneca had its first Covid-19 vaccination clinic Jan. 15 and expects to complete second doses of the vaccine for staff and residents who want it by late next month.

As of late last week, over 80% of the residents at the West Seneca facility had received the first vaccine dose, he added.

For assisted living facilities that felt an initial lag in waiting for a date, there was a feeling of disappointment or frustration. Letina-Land over at Fox Run noted that they were even disappointed that the Jan. 15 date for nursing home residents was later than they'd hoped, with vaccines first arriving at nursing homes in the state on Dec. 21.

Dunlavey, at Peregrine Senior Living, noted that from the beginning of the pandemic, assisted living facilities were not treated with the same urgency as nursing homes or hospitals. Early on, for instance, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was being diverted to hospitals and nursing homes, leaving assisted living facilities short, according to Dunlavey.

Peregrine Senior Living

initially had to get PPE like disposable overalls and cleaners from a local painting contractor, due to a lack of other options.

Newcomb didn't have readily available data on Covid-19 cases in assisted living facilities and noted that it was likely that nursing homes have seen higher death rates. But, still, she argued that assisted living facilities have seen outbreaks throughout the state and still contain highly vulnerable residents.

"The average age of our residents is in the high 80s," Newcomb said. "While they may not have the same intensive skilled nursing or medical needs that residents in nursing homes do, many of them are quite frail. They require a lot of assistance, they have the comorbidities that make them very, very vulnerable to the virus."

As vaccines roll out in assisted living facilities, the next thing to watch will be how many staff members decline to take it. That has been a challenge at some nursing homes.

Newcomb noted that in cases where there have been outbreaks, it's typically been staff members who unintentionally bring the virus in from elsewhere.

At Peregrine Senior Living, for instance, 20 of the facility's 43 staff members have signed up for the first clinic as of last week. But those numbers could still improve by the time of the second clinic, when staffers are set to get their second dose of the vaccine. At that time, staffers who declined the first time will be able to get their first doses as well.

Dunlavey said she hopes employees seeing their colleagues get vaccinated with little complication will encourage more to join them. "That's the only way we're going to break this is to get the staff vaccinated," she said.

Lian Bunny contributed to this report.