

Nancy Hardt and TJ Pyche

Guest columnists

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Community must work together on vaccinations

Don't let perfection be the enemy of good, the aphorism goes.

We are never going to convince everyone of the well-documented efficacy and safety of the COVID-19 vaccines. If we aim for and expect 100%, we are going to fall short.

However, we must try. Not being able to do it all is a poor excuse for doing nothing at all.

A group of 40 volunteers, organized by the Rotary Club of Gainesville, walked through east Gainesville neighborhoods on Feb. 21 to share information about the vaccines and assist neighbors in getting placed on Alachua County's vaccine waiting list. Rotary has the skill set for such pursuits, having worked hard to rid the globe of polio.

During our walk, we directed our efforts to Black neighbors who are 65 or older. As of Feb. 16, according to KFF (formerly the Kaiser Family Foundation), only 6% of the vaccines administered in Florida have gone to Black residents. This is in a state where Black residents compose 16% of our population.

In some ways, what we found was heartening. Many people had received the vaccine, much to the credit of places of worship (led largely by the Rev. Karl Anderson, president of the Alachua County Christian Pastors Association) and the officials from UF Health and the Florida Department of Health who reached out to them.

Veterans had received the vaccine at the Malcom Randall Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center. Those with UF Health's online patient portal, MyChart, had been invited by email. Regardless of whether they had received the vaccine, most neighbors were happy to see us, offering words of encouragement and gratitude for the effort.

Local officials were helpful in the lead up to this effort. Paul Myers of the Florida Department of Health in Alachua County and Mark Sexton of Alachua County were quick to offer resources. They are just two of likely thousands of professionals in our community dedicated in some way to this effort.

We found that people seeking the vaccine faced barriers. For example, both an email and mobile phone number are required to sign up for the vaccine through the portal provided by the Department of Health, yet many of the people we spoke to had only one or the other (or neither). A few neighbors expressed concern about the safety of the vaccine or rejected outright any effort to assist. Not everyone is going to require the same level of effort.

Many in our community, thankfully, have rushed to receive the vaccine as soon as they could, hurdling any barriers that stood in their way. Yet, it is important we do not leave people behind, especially since clear racial disparities persist in disease frequency and death from COVID-19.

As the vaccine becomes more widely available, some of these issues will fix themselves. To illustrate, for every year younger a person is, the more likely it is that they will have the ability to communicate via text or email.

Other issues will not readily resolve, such as the distrust we have already mentioned. We do not need to convince everyone, but we do all need to work together to convince enough people. To do it as quickly as possible, everyone needs to pitch in.

Whether it's participating in or organizing something similar to what we did — or sharing credible and reliable information with friends and neighbors — we can all play a part, big or small.

If you are interested in helping out with a future neighborhood walk or hearing about similar efforts, email TJ Pyche at pychetj@gmail.com.

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