

COVID-19 | Vaccine rollout

CVS, Walgreens show the bulk of wasted doses

BY JOSHUA EATON AND RACHANA PRADHAN
Kaiser Health News

Two national pharmacy chains that the federal government entrusted to inoculate people against COVID-19 account for the lion's share of wasted vaccine doses, according to government data obtained by Kaiser Health News. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recorded 182,874 wasted doses as of late March, three months into the country's effort to vaccinate the masses against the coronavirus. Of those, CVS was responsible for nearly half, and Walgreens for 21%, or nearly 128,500 wasted shots combined.

CDC data suggests that the companies have wasted more doses than states, U.S. territories and federal agencies combined. Pfizer's vaccine, which in December was the first to be deployed and initially required storage at ultracold temperatures, represented nearly 60% of tossed doses.

It's not completely clear from the CDC data why the two chains wasted so much more vaccine than states and federal agencies. Some critics have pointed to poor planning early in the rollout, when the Trump administration leaned heavily on CVS and Walgreens to vaccinate residents and staff members of long-term care facilities. In response to questions, CVS said "nearly all" of its reported vaccine waste occurred during that effort. Walgreens did not specify how many wasted doses were from the long-term care program.

One thing is clear: Months into the nation's vaccination drive, the CDC has a limited view of how much vaccine is going to waste, where it's wasted and who is wasting it, potentially complicating efforts to direct doses to where they are needed most. Public health experts say having a good han-

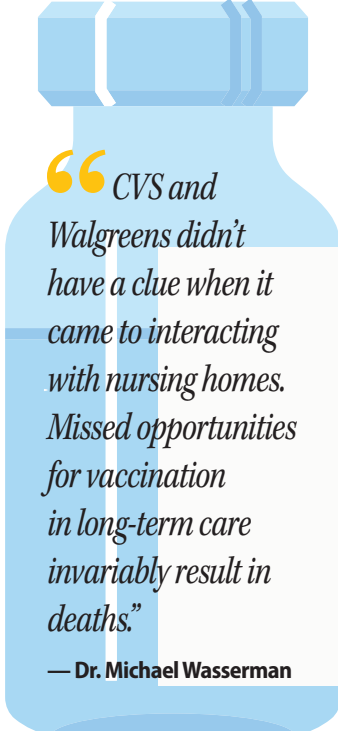
dle on waste is crucial for detecting problems that could derail progress and risk lives.

The Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines, which come in multidose vials, are fragile and have limited shelf lives. Overall, waste has been minuscule: As of March 30, the U.S. had delivered roughly 189.5 million vaccine doses and administered 147.6 million, including 7.7 million in long-term care facilities, according to the CDC.

Among other things, tracking wasted doses helps to identify bottlenecks where distribution adjustments might be needed, said Dr. Bruce Y. Lee, a professor of health policy and management at the City University of New York. Because the federal government is footing the bill for the country's doses, any waste amounts to "basically throwing (taxpayer) money down the chute," he said. CVS, Walgreens and other retailers don't pay for the vaccine. The government provides it. And under the Medicare program, it pays providers roughly \$40 for each dose administered.

Particularly early on, officials didn't adequately assess where there would be demand and set up sites in response, Lee said — something that's especially important when trying to get as many people as possible as quickly as possible. "If you think of any business, they're going to determine where the customers are first," he said. "It's not just a matter of loading up vaccine and going to a place."

Kaiser Health News' survey of vaccine waste is based on public records requests to the CDC and all 50 states, five major cities, Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C. Combined, the records document more than 200,000 wasted doses. However, the data has clear shortcomings. Data from 15 states, the District of Columbia and multiple U.S. territories are



not included in the CDC's records. And, in general, waste reporting has been inconsistent.

In addition to the CDC, 33 states and D.C. provided at least some data to Kaiser Health News in response to those records requests. They reported at least 18,675 additional doses that have been wasted across 10 jurisdictions not represented in the CDC figures. They include 9,229 doses wasted in Texas as of March 26 and 2,384 in New Hampshire as of March 10.

An additional eight states told Kaiser Health News of more wasted doses than they reported to the CDC.

But no city or state comes close to the waste reported by CVS and Walgreens, whose long-term care vaccination drive was criticized by some officials as slow and ineffective. Among nursing home staffers, a median of 37.5% reported they got a shot in the first month, according to a February CDC study.

"To me, this ultimately cor-

relates with just poor planning," said Dr. Michael Wasserman, immediate past president of the California Association of Long Term Care Medicine and a critic of the corporate effort.

Wasserman said the companies' approach was too restrictive, and their unfamiliarity with long-term facilities' needs harmed the effort.

"CVS and Walgreens didn't have a clue when it came to interacting with nursing homes," he said. "Missed opportunities for vaccination in long-term care invariably result in deaths."

A CVS spokesperson, Michael DeAngelis, in an email blamed wasted doses on "issues with transportation restrictions, limitations on redirecting unused doses, and other factors."

"Despite the inherent challenges, our teams were able to limit waste to approximately one dose per onsite vaccination clinic," he added.

Walgreens said its wastage amounted to less than 0.5% of vaccines the company administered through March 29, which totaled 3 million shots in long-term care facilities and 5.2 million more through the federal government's retail pharmacy partnership.

"Our goal has always been ensuring every dose of vac-

cine is used," company spokesperson Kris Lathan said in an email. Before scheduled clinics, she said, Walgreens would base doses it would need on registrations, "which minimized excess and reduced overestimations."

Vaccine waste could increase in the coming weeks as officials shift tactics to inoculate harder-to-reach populations, public health experts say.

"I think we are getting to a place where, to continue to be successful with vaccination, we're going to have to tolerate some waste," said Dr. Marcus Plescia, chief medical officer of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials. People unwilling to travel to a mass-vaccination site might go to a primary care physician or smaller rural pharmacy that might not be able to use every dose in an open vial, he said.

The reasons states gave for waste varied, from broken vials and syringes to provider storage errors, to leftover doses from open vials that couldn't be used.

The largest waste incidents, in which hundreds of doses were lost at a time, tended to be due to freezer malfunctions or workers leaving doses at room temperature too long.

But state records also register the little things that can go

wrong.

On Dec. 16, the public health department in Gunnison County, Colorado, lost a single dose of the Pfizer vaccine when someone bumped into a table and a vial spilled. On Jan. 5, the Tri-County Health Department in Westminster, Colorado, reported that it wasted a Moderna dose because a hypodermic needle bent.

Remi Graber is a registered nurse who has vaccinated people at mass sites and community health clinics in Rhode Island. They said it's not uncommon for a vial to have one too many or one too few doses, which can lead to a dose being counted as wasted. There are also sometimes syringe problems that result in waste.

But Graber said the biggest problem is people not showing up. Once a vial is punctured, Pfizer's vaccine must be used within six hours. On April 1, Moderna announced that an opened vaccine vial was good for 12 hours — double what it had been previously.

"What could happen is you get people who just decide, 'You know what? I don't need my vaccine today. I'm not going to show up,'" they said. "Well, now we're scrambling to find somebody to take the vaccine because we don't want to waste it."

Stock

Continued from C1

Alas, things rarely go that well with a trade. And when a stock is getting clobbered, you fail to cut your losses, clinging to hope of a recovery that can prove elusive.

Tip No. 3: Sometimes the best decision is to do nothing

It seems these days that the term FOMO, or fear of missing out, gets bandied about a lot. With all the news about riches to be had in the markets — buying the likes of the GameStop — it seems like we should be harvesting our share of the goods by getting in early on the next big thing. But in the quest to do so, we sometimes feel a temptation to make purchases that aren't really well thought out. Often, this results in disappointing outcomes.

Unless you are certain that you have an investment that you understand and makes sense, it's better to do nothing. Nobody lost a penny on money they didn't invest.

Tip No. 4: Never trade when you're feeling emotional

If you've read this column over time, you'll recognize a theme that I've hopefully cultivated: Emotions are the enemy of the investor. That's equally true of traders as well.

Greed and fear cause us to act oppositely of our interests, and the only way to counter

the influence of emotions on trading is to establish disciplines — like sell targets — that create a process in place of trading on whimsy.

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