

Hurdles abound for homebound

No coordinated program to help them get shots

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Kathleen Roskell wanted to make sure her 87-year-old husband was vaccinated against COVID-19. But trying to get an appointment for him wasn't her biggest hurdle — it was getting him there.

Richard Roskell, a retired FDNY firefighter, has Parkinson's disease and is homebound. The Garden City resident and other sick and elderly homebound Long Islanders face huge obstacles trying to get vaccinated against COVID-19, as there is no coordinated program designed for them.

Some medical programs that treat people in their homes have the ability, but not the doses, to vaccinate their patients. Northwell Health and the state are partnering to find a solution but have not yet rolled out a plan. Most homebound people qualify for the vaccine because of their medical conditions or age.

Kathleen Roskell figured even if she secured a slot for her husband at Jones Beach or another vaccination site, getting him there might be dangerous. She said his walk between the reclining chair and bathroom is precarious. But the risk of getting the deadly disease is even more frightening.

"He has COPD," she said. "If he gets COVID, he won't make it."

Richard Roskell's doctor at MDVIP, a national network of primary care physicians, said he did not have any vaccine doses but was hoping he would in the coming weeks.

New Hyde Park-based Northwell Health is working on a plan with the state health department and local Long Island groups to get the COVID-19 vaccine to vulnerable populations, including in Nassau and Suffolk counties, according to Dr. Deb-



Homebound Richard Roskell, 87, of Garden City got help getting to a CVS store for a shot.

bie Salas-Lopez, the system's vice president for community and population health.

"We are hopeful in the next few weeks and months we will have more supply and that is the light at the end of the tunnel for us," she said.

Salas-Lopez, who also heads the state's Long Island Regional Health Equity Task Force, said faith-based groups, senior centers and other volunteer organizations are working with them to help identify people who can't get to vaccination sites.

"It's not only about supply, but it's about planning and coming together and stitching together these collaborations," she said.

On Wednesday, Ro, a health care technology company, announced it is working with the state health department on a pilot program in parts of Westchester County to vaccinate people who face "logistical changes accessing vaccination sites," including the homebound.

The Food and Drug Administration's emergency authorization of the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine could eliminate some issues that make it more difficult to vaccinate people who are homebound as opposed to vaccinating people at

centers. Storage requirements for the J&J vaccine are less stringent than the extreme cold needed for the Pfizer-BioNTech and to a lesser extent the Moderna vaccine. And it can be delivered in one dose instead of two.

New York City announced Thursday that members of the FDNY will use the Johnson & Johnson vaccine in a program to vaccinate homebound residents.

The staff of Northwell Health's House Calls Program, which serves about 2,000 people a year on Long Island as well as in Queens and Manhattan, has experience giving vaccines to its homebound patients, medical director Dr. Karen Abrashkin said.

"We deliver all kinds of vaccines in the home, from flu shots to pneumonia shots, and we have done that for many, many years," she said.

She pointed out that homebound patients tend to be of advanced age with multiple medical conditions, making them more vulnerable if they do contract COVID-19.

"Once New York State has an adequate supply of vaccine and allocates it to the health system, we will be offering it to patients in their homes," Abrashkin said.

Supply is also an issue for Linda Taylor, CEO of the Visiting Nurse Service & Hospice of Suffolk. She said her organization has the ability to vaccinate both its homebound patients and patients who can come into the office, but it is not receiving the supply of doses that initiative would require.

Last week, Kathleen Roskell got tired of waiting. With the help of a home health care aide and her son, they were able to get an appointment for her husband at a nearby CVS. The three of them helped get Richard in and out of the car and a wheelchair as he got his first dose of the Moderna vaccine.

"I would not have been able to do it if I didn't have help," she said. "But what about all the people who don't have help? Or all the people who are living alone and can't go out?"