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## OPINION

## Trying to get a vaccine is like playing roulette

By MARY SCHMICH

Chicago Tribune

Welcome, everybody, to vaccine roulette!

It's a crazy, new game that requires great endurance, an epic tolerance for failure and, above all, luck.

Maybe you'll be lucky enough to get stuck in a snowstorm near a carload of health care workers who happen to be carrying a few doses of the COVID-19 vaccine that are set to expire and need to be used ASAP. That's how a few people in Oregon scored their shot the other day.

Or maybe after your vain attempts to sign up for a vaccine at those big pharmacy conglomerates, you'll be the surprise winner of a hospital's vaccine lottery. A couple of Chicago people I know have scored that way.

Or maybe you'll be lucky enough to have a friend who discovers through other friends that a different Chicago hospital is opening vaccine appointments to non-patients. Maybe your friend will share that precious info with you. Maybe, if you hurry, you can call and, after half an hour on hold, get an appointment for a shot in March.

That's how I, as a member of vaccine group 1b, just got my appointment at Rush University Medical Center, after hours of losing the virus roulette game on assorted websites. I made the appointment gratefully, but painfully aware of how many people are still stuck.

Roulette, says the dictionary, is "something involving a high degree of chance and unpredictability." And the only predictable thing about the COVID vaccine rollout at this point is its unpredictability.

To be fair: It's important to acknowledge that getting the vaccine to millions of Amer-

icans is a vast, daunting operation. A certain amount of confusion is inevitable. Patience is necessary.

But finding a vaccine appointment is testing the patience of saints. Almost everyone I know has a story by now. Of hours spent on the Walgreens site, the Jewel-Osco site, various government sites. Of phone calls made in vain, of tips followed down rabbit holes.

Try early in the morning, someone says. No, try late at night. No, try on Fridays. No, Mondays work best.

In virus roulette, there are no obvious, fixed rules, and even the tech savvy are stymied.

Some of the saddest stories come from people desperately seeking a vaccine not for themselves but for their parents.

"I've been manically focused on it for the last three weeks," says Cara DiPasquale, who lives near Chicago while her parents live in New York state. "First two appointments I nabbed were then canceled by the county, after promised shots did not arrive."

She then made appointments with the state and Walgreens. This week, at last, her parents got their first doses.

"But," she says, "the system is not — and this is a generalization, of course — designed for the senior set it is intended to serve. Not to mention people without access to a computer or internet."

Deborah Risteen Mercer echoes that complaint. The Chicago hospital where her mother is affiliated, she says, requires patients to get their app to be notified about the vaccine. But her mother, who's 89, doesn't have a smartphone. So she signed up on her mother's behalf.

"It's a ridiculous system," she says, "and I

don't know if she could navigate it on her own."

The tortuous systems exist from coast to coast.

"Every health department or grocery store distributor has a totally different system," says my colleague Lara Weber, who has been trying to navigate the mess for her parents in Florida, "and it's hard enough for me to sort out the website guidance, let alone my parents and their friends."

A friend in California reports that his parents — ages 87 and 88 — had to drive two hours to get their first vaccine dose.

My colleague Georgia Garvey signed up for text alerts about when and where her dad in Florida could get the vaccine, but so far has received only campaign ads for Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis.

"Infuriating," she says.

Pamela Halloran, who lives in Chicago's western suburbs, has been trying to get a vaccine for her 87-year-old mother, who has dementia. The futility, she says, reminds her of the time she tried to get tickets to the Dave Matthews Band for her son. And in the face of constant futility, she has decided to calm down.

"Why stress?" she says. "We've come this far."

That's the healthiest way to play virus roulette. Remember how far we've come in this pandemic, how much stress we've endured. The vaccine is getting closer for all of us. With some luck, its distribution will become less of a gamble.

In the meantime, we can keep washing our hands, wearing our masks, keeping our distance and crossing our fingers.

Mary Schmich is a columnist for the Chicago Tribune and winner of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for commentary.

## VA should rein in predatory for-profit schools

By CARRIE WOFFORD

Special to Stars and Stripes

As Denis McDonough prepares to take the helm as the new secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, he must address many difficult challenges. But there's one issue that's easy — stopping the fleecing of America's veterans by predatory for-profit colleges. It's not just a policy issue; it's a Biden family issue.

President Joe Biden's late son, Beau, was a national leader in standing up for veterans who were scammed by for-profit colleges targeting the GI Bill. As Delaware attorney general, he led a successful, multistate action in 2012 to give VA control over a for-profit college website, GIBill.com, that had tricked tens of thousands of veterans out of their GI Bill benefits. A year later, Biden partnered with Vice President Kamala Harris (then California attorney general) to successfully sue Corinthian, a for-profit college chain that bamboozled tens of thousands of veterans and servicemembers, even posing their salesmen as "Pentagon advisers."

Flash forward to 2020: The Trump administration decimated much of the progress Biden and Harris started. Recently the GIBill.com domain went back to private ownership after VA failed to renew it, undoing Biden's hard work. And last summer, the Trump administration overruled VA career civil servants who tried to follow the law and stop the flow of GI Bill funds to deceptive colleges.

Predatory colleges soak up a highly disproportionate share of the GI Bill and military tuition assistance, and are responsible for a huge portion of America's student loan default problem, leaving students jobless or with subpar earnings. They single out veterans and servicemembers for aggressive and deceptive recruiting in order to gain access to the "military gravy train," as one for-profit college whistleblower testified before Congress. Much of this is incentivized by a loophole in the Higher Education Act (the "90/10 loophole") that allows for-profit colleges to use GI Bill funds to skirt the cap on federal funds the schools otherwise face, leading some for-profit schools to view veterans as "nothing more than dollar signs in uniform."

McDonough can start by kicking deceptive colleges out of the GI Bill, as required by law (recently strengthened by a unanimous Congress). This is something the nation's leading veterans and military service organizations called for in 2019 and 2016, as did VA's Inspector General.

Countering deceptive marketing by predatory colleges will require McDonough to help veterans recognize and avoid fraud, including by improving VA's college search tool with a "risk-index," caution flags, consumer protection warnings, student outcome metrics and complaints, and by making the tool actually searchable. McDonough also needs to educate veterans about what a "Master Promissory Note" is, because too many veterans wind up with student loans

they didn't understand. He should also make it easier for student veterans to file complaints and should take those complaints seriously.

McDonough can work with his counterpart, education secretary nominee Miguel Cardona, to reinstate loan forgiveness for defrauded students (many of whom are veterans) and to release the data on schools that are skirting the 90/10 rule, something that hasn't been reported since 2016.

Perhaps most important, McDonough should finish the work Beau Biden started by shutting down abusive websites and holding schools accountable for deceptive practices by the websites they hide behind. He must immediately reclaim the GIBill.com domain to honor Biden's legacy and should trademark terms that are ripe for abuse, like "Yellow Ribbon" (and help the Defense Department trademark "Army" and "Navy") especially in light of the pernicious websites Army.com and NavyEnlist.com — for-profit college fronts — that the Federal Trade Commission recently shut down for tricking patriotic Americans. Those websites are just the tip of the iceberg.

In light of the many complicated issues facing McDonough at VA, one of his easiest decisions should be to stop the fleecing of America's military heroes.

Carrie Wofford is president of Veterans Education Success and former senior counsel for the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions.