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OPINION

Trying to get a vaccine is like playing roulette

BY MARY SCHMICH

Welcome, everybody, to vacci- cine roulette! It’s a 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 you’re desperate to get. If you’re really lucky, you’ll find a pharmacy right in your own town, with a van, 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 desperateely 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 appoint- ments 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 Risten Mercer echoes that complaint. The Chicago hospital where her mother is affiliated, she says, requires pa- tients to get her 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. One very 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 par- ents — ages 87 and 88 — had to drive two hours to get their first vaccine dose. My colleague Georgia Garvey signed up for test 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.

“Incurfating,” 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, re- minds 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 decid- ed to calm down. “Why stress?” she says. “We’ve come far.”

That’s the healthiest way to play virus roulette. Remember how far we’ve come in this pandemic, how much stress we’ve en- dured. The vaccine is getting closer for all of us. With some luck, its distribution will be 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

A decade after President Joe Biden’s late son, Beau, was a member of vaccine activists 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 millions of military members and servicemembers for aggressive and deceptive marketing in order to gain access to the “military gravy train,” as one for-profit college whistleblower testified before Con- gress. 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 decep- tive 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 organiza- tions called for in 2019 and 2020, as did VA’s Inspector General.

Countering deceptive marketing by pred- atory colleges will require McDonough to use the tool actually searchable. McDonough can work with his counter- part, education secretary nominee Miguel Cardona, to successfully (and legally) transfer the GI Bill’s “Army” and “Navy”教育部 to the Department of Education for members of the military services overseas. However, the GI Bill’s “Army” and “Navy”教育部 channels are not used to accept GI Bill benefits. The Department of Defense for members of the military services overseas. However, the GI Bill’s “Army” and “Navy”教育部 channels are thus appropriated funds for distribution to eligible members overseas DOD personnel are located.

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