

How does Manatee County pick who gets a COVID-19 vaccine? It is entirely random

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Tens of thousands of Manatee County seniors are waiting their turn to get the COVID-19 vaccine. But while vaccine supplies remain low, the odds of getting vaccinated are greater than winning the Florida lottery.

As of Friday morning, there were 10,359 people in Manatee County who had been fully vaccinated against COVID-19, according to the Florida Department of Health.. Another 20,197 people have received the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

At the current rate, Manatee County has a long way to go to vaccinate all of its approximate 100,000 residents who are 65 years old or over. That is leaving many in the community frustrated and questioning whether the county's COVID-19 vaccination standby pool is the fairest and most effective way to select when someone gets their shot.

Currently, there are about 180,000 people signed up in the county's standby pool with hopes of being vaccinated at the county's drive-thru at Tom Bennett Park, 400 Cypress Creek Blvd, Bradenton. When COVID-19 vaccine doses become available, people are randomly pulled from that pool and given a shot.

Some residents have questioned whether the process is really random, and suggest it is the reason few minority residents are getting vaccinated.

The county's IT director said it's entirely up to a computer to decide who will get a vaccine and when.

"It is fully automated. There is no other information in there, whether race, ethnicity or address," said Paul Alexander. "While I understand there is frustration, if you have a pool of 150,000 people and you get 1,000 vaccines, there are going to be 149,000 very unhappy people and there is just no way around that."

HOW DOES THE STANDBY POOL WORK?

In order to be added to the standby pool, any Florida resident 65 years old or over can go online at vax.mymanatee.org and fill out an online form.

The form is created by Seamless Docs, a cloud-based application that the county uses to intake the information. From there, county staff export an Microsoft-based database.

The primary information the database lists is the person's name, contact information and whether a second senior, like a spouse, is included on the registration. An additional data field listing people's zip code is optional.

"There in, is some randomness," Alexander explained.

When doses become available — which is determined by the weekly allotment granted to the county by the Florida Department of Emergency Management — that database is used to randomly select from the pool who will get a shot.

To schedule an appointment, a built-in interface allows a 311 operator to tell the database to "fetch one" and someone will be randomly selected. The operator will then call that individual to schedule their appointment.

The Manatee County Board of County [Commissioners approved the system](#) that chooses people at random after the previous first-come, first-served [system crashed within moments](#) of going live online.

"We wanted to make it more equitable. You didn't have to crash the website. There wasn't a race to get on," Director of Public Safety Jacob Saur said.

The county is upgrading its system with the purchase of the Everbridge COVID-19 Shield Vaccine Distribution software package, which is an extension to its CEM, or customer experience management, platform. Manatee Currently uses Everbridge already to manage Alert Manatee, which sends alerts for emergency updates such as evacuation notices, boil water advisories, weather warnings and hazardous traffic or road conditions.

That will enable county staff just to ask the system to "fetch" people as doses become available, and then input the information into the Everbridge software.

That software then will send a text message to any registered phone number that it recognizes as belonging to a cell phone, from 88911, with the appointment information. The text will ask the person to confirm by responding with a "1" in a text message.

If the phone number used during registration is a landline, the person will receive a phone call from 941-742-4300 with an automated message providing the appointment information and will ask the person to press "1" to confirm.

These robo calls or text messages will not come from any other numbers, Saur stressed in response to concerns that some residents thought they needed to answer any and all unknown numbers in hopes of getting a vaccine.

Anyone who doesn't confirm their appointment within the allotted time window, will get a follow-up call from a 311 operator to confirm their appointment.

The county has been already using the system to schedule appointments for front-line healthcare workers. Next week it will begin testing it out further by scheduling some appointments for seniors, with hopes of fully implemented it the following week.