

How people looking for COVID vaccines struggle with and conquer a digital divide

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Win the lottery or nail an appointment for a COVID-19 vaccine dose in South Florida? For thousands of seniors, their friends and family members and caregivers, getting a shot might feel like winning the lottery.

That's how valuable — and seemingly [hard to get](#) — that appointment is given how demand far outstrips supply. And it's also telling how technology tools are not always accessible to every member of a community.

In a world where many seniors don't have computers or computer skills, asking an older population to constantly check websites, navigate links, monitor Twitter alerts as appointments open, close, then open again, has been a challenge.

“We are hearing more deep frustration than success stories from seniors 65-plus trying to sign up to receive the COVID-19 vaccine in Florida,” said Jeff Johnson, state director for [AARP Florida](#).

“The sign-up process is cumbersome and time consuming, even for younger adults helping parents or older relatives,” he said. “There is a lack of sign-up process standardization among vaccine providers even in the same city and the [state's vaccine locator](#) does not always offer a phone option for providers.”

‘LIKE WINNING THE LOTTO’

Lourdes Diaz knows how it is. She said Mount Sinai Medical Center reached out to her 91-year-old mother on Dec. 23 because her mom is a patient. Diaz said she called the Miami Beach hospital to get an appointment for her, left messages and emails. “I even used Twitter, but no luck.”

Her mom, she said, does not know how to use the internet.

“I was finally able to get my mother an appointment at Jackson Health. I got lucky,” Diaz said. “They were supposed to open the appointment portal at 11 a.m. but it was already open when I checked in around 10 a.m. Registering was quick and I had no problems. The appointment itself went great. We were ushered in right away and everything was very organized. My mother has her second appointment this week.”

But Diaz said trying to secure those shots at both hospitals pulled her away from her own work responsibilities for about 10 hours as she spent time researching and reaching out.

“Thankfully, I was working remotely and had the flexibility to be persistent,” Diaz said. “But this has been a very frustrating experience. I believe everyone is trying their best, but there are so many barriers. It’s like winning the lotto.”

DIGITAL DIVIDE

According to Pew Research Center, Americans 60 and older are spending more time with computers — on desktops, laptops or smart phones.

In 2000, 14% of those ages 65 and older were internet users. Now, 73% are, according to Pew. “And while smartphone ownership was uncommon at all ages around the turn of the 21st century, now about half (53%) of people 65 and older are smartphone owners.”

At the same time, Pew’s research found that about 30% of adults in low-income households below \$30,000 a year don’t own a smartphone. More than 40% lack home broadband services or a traditional computer and even fewer own tablets. “By comparison, each of these technologies is nearly ubiquitous among adults in households earning \$100,000 or more a year.”

But that doesn’t mean that seniors who have the technology use it to full benefit. Sometimes the digital divide also widens because of declining health. Maybe it’s a vision problem. Or, simply, some people of all ages just don’t care to use computers.

But even among those who do, that may not be enough. Vaccine appointment alerts are coming fast and furious on social media, in places beyond the comfort of Facebook.

COMPUTER SAVVY NOT ENOUGH

Take Mirna Miranda from Miami-Dade. She has the kind of computer tech-savvy that might impress producers of a “WarGames” movie remake.

Like many of the 4.5 million [seniors 65 and older living in Florida](#), the 70-year-old and her 75-year-old husband, Carlos, wanted COVID-19 vaccines. Seniors 65 and older are eligible for the two-dose Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines.

The Mirandas called appointment hotlines like Mount Sinai Medical Center and left voicemails. No one ever called them back, they said.

They tried online portals in Miami-Dade and Broward, but appointment slots were always closed.

So Mirna decided to set up three computers inside her Tamiami-area home so the pair could work together to search and book appointments online. They were willing to drive across county lines to Broward, the Keys or Palm Beach to be vaccinated.

The couple’s strategy worked. Or so they thought.

Two days before they were set to receive their first shot at Baptist Health in Kendall, the hospital [canceled all first-dose appointments](#) because of supply constraints.

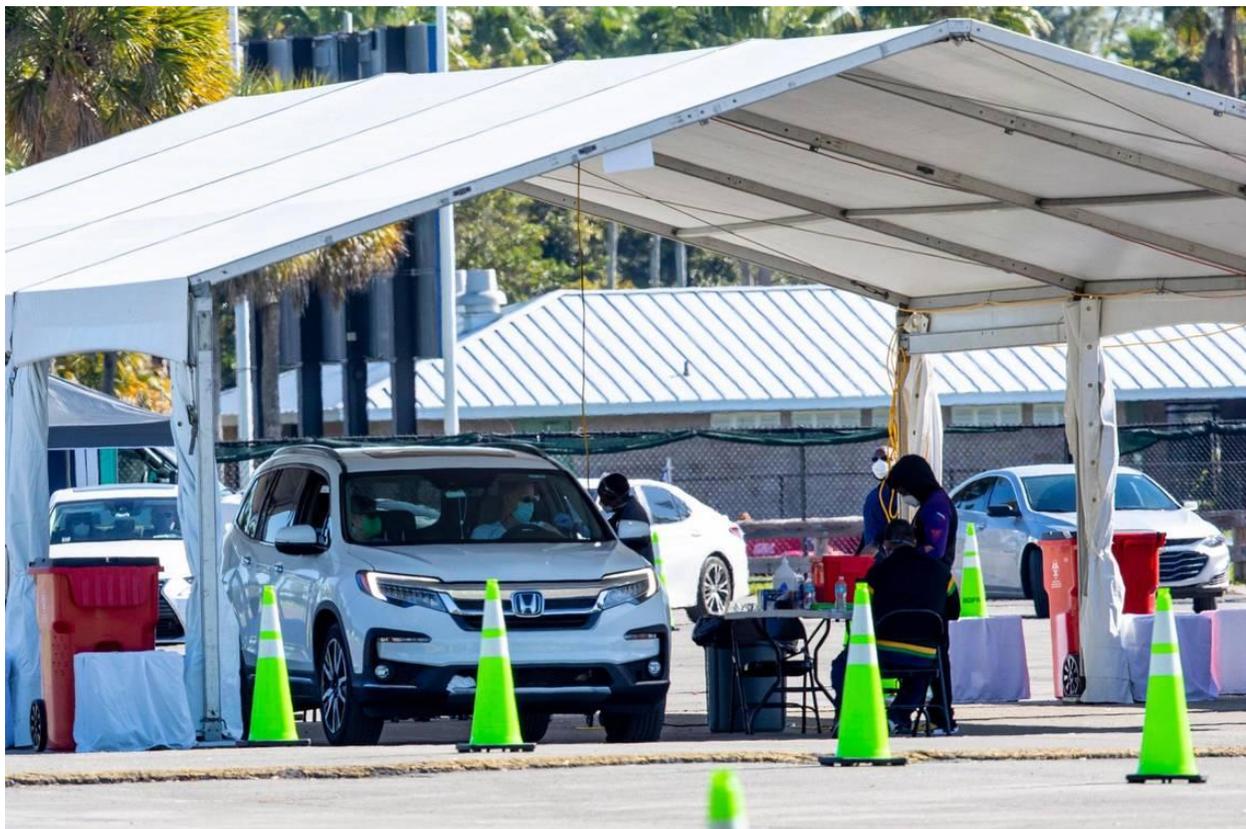
The Mirandas, and many like them, were back to where they started. Then Carlos saw a Miami Herald article that had tips on how to use Twitter to be [notified about vaccine availability](#). He followed Jackson Health and set the account to send instant alerts any time Jackson tweeted. Last Saturday, while having coffee, his phone pinged with an alert: Jackson Health System was opening slots.

“We rushed to our three computers, working side by side and were able to book the appointments for that same day in the afternoon,” Carlos said.

The couple received their first dose at Jackson South Medical Center and said the process went smoothly.

After first-day bugs, common to every location, Jackson streamlined the [vaccine-delivery process](#). Seniors, for the most part, have reported that they have been greeted by friendly staff. Well-organized, the whole process has generally taken about 30 to 40 minutes at Jackson-run sites.

But you have to *get* to that point — and for many seniors and their caretakers, the digital divide to secure an appointment can feel like a bridge too far.



Miami-Dade residents 65 or older line up in their cars as they wait for the COVID-19 vaccine at Tropical Park in Miami, Florida, on Sunday, January 10, 2021. All vaccination sites in the county require an appointment and no walk-ins are permitted.

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NEW FEATURES TO GET APPOINTMENTS

Healthcare providers are trying to make it easier. On Friday, Florida opened a new website to help seniors and other eligible residents opt in to a “save their place in line” feature through a [pre-registration process](#).

Healthcare workers with direct patient contact and long-term care residents and staff can also pre-register for the COVID-19 vaccine. The website is [myvaccine.fl.gov](#). Pre-registration by phone is also available. For Miami-Dade, call 888-499-0840 or TTY 888-256-8918. For Broward, call 866-201-6313 or TTY 844-252-2003. And for the Florida Keys, call 866-201-7069 or TTY 833-990-2908.

Florida residents who do not meet the priority criteria can also sign up through the website to receive email, text or phone updates that should tell them when they will be eligible to receive the vaccine.

To help bridge the gulf, some South Florida institutions have altered the process as they see what works and what hasn’t worked so well.

“Aside from creating an online enrollment portal for people to book appointments, we have created key partnerships to make sure people in hard-to-reach areas have access to the vaccine,” said Jackson Health spokeswoman Lidia Amoretti.



Nurses prepare COVID-19 vaccine shots for Miami-Dade County residents with appointments at Tropical Park in Miami on Wednesday, Jan. 13, 2021.

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TRYING TO REACH UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES

Among them: Jackson began collaborating with more than 50 [houses of worship in Miami-Dade County](#) — churches, synagogues, mosques. The goal is to reach seniors in underserved communities who may have challenges with technology and are unable to secure an appointment online, Amoretti said.

“Our goal is to continue dedicating one day of the week to vaccinate members of these houses of worship as long as we continue to receive vaccines from the state and there is demand from this group. So far, we have filled more than 5,550 appointment slots through this partnership,” she said.

There is demand, the Rev. John White of Immanuel Temple AME Church in Pembroke Pines told the Miami Herald in January.

“There is a great need in the [African-American community](#),” White said. “ I challenge all healthcare providers to partner with African-American churches if you want inroads to get people the vaccine. We all have members who want it.”

Florida’s vaccine [partnership with Publix](#) as a major dispensary of the doses has also faced criticism for leaving large numbers of low-income and Black neighborhoods at a disadvantage. There aren’t enough Publix supermarkets in these neighborhoods or close by, an analysis by the Sun Sentinel found.

As of late January, the only Publix supermarkets in South Florida that are on board are those in Palm Beach County and two stores in the Keys — Islamorada and Key West.