

Pulse: State Health Care: Falling vaccine demand could mean another tough summer



BY DAN GOLDBERG | 04/23/2021 12:30 PM EDT

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A patient receives a Covid-19 vaccine from a health care worker in surgical gloves. | Seth Wenig/AP Photo

With help from Susannah Luthi

ON TAP

- **May is critical for vaccine efforts** as supply now outpaces demand in many states.
- **Single-payer dies in California for now**, but the public option has life in Connecticut.

— **Tennessee's Medicaid waiver is headed to court** as enrollees challenge block grant.

Welcome to Pulse: State Health Care. What do women want? [Apparently, it's a vaccinated man](#). What do we want? Tips to dgoldberg@politico.com.

DRIVING THE WEEK

WHAT GOVERNORS ARE THINKING ABOUT FOR MAY — It's all about the second 50 percent. Governors across the country said this week that getting the first half of their residents vaccinated was a logistical and supply challenge. But now they have a new one: Demand is falling off.

If that trend doesn't reverse in May, it's going to make it hard to have a relatively normal summer.

North Carolina officials aren't mincing words, starting a "Bring Summer Back" campaign that aims to get two-thirds of state residents vaccinated by June 1. About 40 percent of residents have had at least one dose so far, but the pace is slowing. This week, the state is on pace to administer the fewest first doses since early February, when a winter storm blanketed the area.

It's a similar story across the country. In Ohio, fewer than 25,000 people are receiving their first dose every day, down about two-thirds from the end of March and early April. Several providers have asked the state to stop sending them doses because they already have more than they can use.

Republican Gov. Mike DeWine is considering tying the loosening of restrictions to the number of people vaccinated, as another Democratic counterpart, [Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear, is doing](#). Beshear said he would lift most restrictions once 2.5 million adults, or about 70 percent, are vaccinated. That should happen by the end of May, Beshear said, if residents take advantage of the supply the state has on hand. But uptake is slowing in Kentucky as well, especially with men younger than 50.

Alaska, New Mexico and North Dakota are no longer ordering all the vaccine that the federal government makes available to them. Many local and state officials told POLITICO they weren't expecting supply to catch up with demand so quickly, but the sudden drop in interest is accelerating efforts to incentivize the vaccine.

In New Orleans, for example, a mobile vaccination site had a "shots for shots" night. In Utah, [free Lyft rides](#) are available to people who need help getting to a vaccine appointment.

Biden administration officials this week said to be patient and that they expect demand will pick up in the coming months. They point to the new Community Corps, the all-volunteer group that is supposed to amplify the government's vaccine messaging within their own communities and to lead on-the-ground efforts to combat skepticism and misinformation.

The key metric: The seven-day average number of Americans receiving their first dose dropped below 1.6 million for the first time since early March.

THE KIDS ARE NOT ALRIGHT — State officials say that key to a successful May will be getting younger Americans vaccinated, something that was made more complicated by the Biden administration's decision to pause Johnson & Johnson, a one-dose shot that was expected to be more convenient for college students who leave campus every summer.

"It gets a little harder if you have to do two doses," Utah Gov. Spencer Cox said during a Thursday press conference.

A CDC advisory panel could recommend resuming the Johnson & Johnson vaccine as early as this afternoon, but that likely won't be enough as hesitancy and disinterest appear prevalent among younger Americans, particularly in rural areas. In Arkansas, only 20 percent of people under age 64 have had at least one dose. In Alabama, it's 18 percent of people under 54 years old.

MICHIGAN GETTING MORE BODIES BUT NOT MORE SHOTS — More than 200 federal personnel are arriving in Michigan this week to assist at mass vaccination sites, but the White House made clear it is not planning to send additional vaccines even as the state continues to lead the nation in new Covid-19 cases and other states contend with a supply glut.

Rep. [Debbie Dingell](#) (D-Mich.) said in an interview that the Biden administration is failing Economics 101. "It's basic supply and demand," she said. "If there is demand in one place, you send supply."

Michigan is averaging roughly 6,400 new cases per day, down about 9 percent over two weeks but still the highest raw total in the nation. Florida, which has more than twice as many people, is averaging the second-most cases at around 6,000 per day.

... **Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker** has also told the federal government that his state — which has very little vaccine hesitancy, according to a [recent federal report](#) — would welcome any doses that other states can't use. The Biden administration is not taking him up on it.

Other happenings:

Hawaii: [Gov. David Ige on Tuesday](#) announced that beginning May 11, inter-island travel will be allowed for anyone who can show they've been fully vaccinated for two weeks. Currently, the state requires proof of a negative test or a 10-day isolation.

North Dakota: Gov. Doug Burgum said he will [end the state's Covid-19 emergency declaration](#) at the end of the month. Alaska's Mike Dunleavy is the only other governor to let an emergency order lapse, according to the National Academy for State Health Policy. (Emergency orders in Michigan and Wisconsin were shut down by courts.)

South Carolina: [Gov. Henry McMaster signed legislation](#) requiring all school districts to offer in-person instruction beginning Monday.

MEDICAID

ADVOCATES SUE OVER TENNESSEE BLOCK GRANT — The National Health Law Program and Tennessee Justice Center are spearheading a lawsuit against Tennessee's first-of-its-kind waiver that caps federal Medicaid funding for the state. The suit was filed Thursday in a federal district court in Washington, D.C.

The agreement is different from traditional block grants. Tennessee will receive capped payments, and that funding would increase when enrollment grows.

The plaintiffs include 13 Medicaid enrollees with chronic disease or disabilities and a pediatrician from rural Tennessee. They argue that even before the so-called Medicaid block grant plan moved forward, the state and its private Medicaid insurers were already skimping on medical care. Capping costs through the waiver — which also allows Tennessee to limit prescription drug coverage — will “only intensify the harm these beneficiaries have suffered,” the lawsuit states.

The Trump administration in its final days approved Tennessee's waiver for 10 years without the required notice-and-comment period — and the plaintiffs stress that officials did so “without even knowing the details of the experiment,” as Tennessee hadn't published an evaluation of its plan. The policy faces almost certain dismantling by the Biden administration, but a favorable court ruling for the plaintiffs could save officials the political and administrative hassle.

LEGISLATIVE BATTLES

STATE OF HEALTH INSURANCE EXPANSION — California lawmakers are giving up on the [state's single-payer bill](#), saying they need more time to figure out how to pay for a plan that was expected to cost hundreds of billions of dollars per year, POLITICO's Victoria Colliver reports.

... **But in Connecticut**, an Assembly committee on Thursday [advanced a public option bill](#). The legislation, which would allow unions, nonprofits and small businesses to buy into the state health benefits plan, still faces long odds in a state that is home to several of the nation's largest health insurers who wield considerable political clout. Democratic Gov. Ned Lamont has not thrown his weight behind the measure.

The heads of Anthem, Cigna, CVS Health, UnitedHealth Group, and Harvard Pilgrim Health Care and Tufts Health Plan [wrote Lamont](#) last week threatening to leave the state if the bill becomes law. “The pandemic has demonstrated that employees can work virtually, making it easier for companies to choose where they are domiciled and grow,” they said. “As a result, it has never been more critical for the state to create a climate that retains and attracts businesses that will help stabilize the economy.”

OPIOID ANTIDOTE REQUIRED — New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy [signed legislation](#) requiring doctors who prescribe opioids to include a prescription for an overdose antidote such as naloxone. New Jersey is at least the eighth state to pass a co-prescribing law.

OKLAHOMA IS LATEST TO PASS HEARTBEAT BILL — Gov. Kevin Stitt is expected to soon sign a series of [anti-abortion measures, including one](#) that would make any doctor who performs an abortion after a fetal heartbeat is detected guilty of homicide. Similar heartbeat laws have been passed in 12 states, and all have been blocked in court.

NAMES IN THE NEWS

Angela Dunn, Utah's state epidemiologist, is resigning to take over the Salt Lake County health department.

Robert Knodell is the new acting director of the Missouri health department. Knodell, who had been deputy chief of staff to Gov. Mike Parson, takes over for Randall Williams, who resigned on Tuesday. Williams drew national scrutiny for his unsuccessful efforts to shutter the state's lone abortion clinic.

ON POLITICO

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[To repeat or not to repeat — that's the question for the next school year](#)

[Biden world fears many vaccine skeptics may be unreachable — they are trying anyway](#)

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AROUND THE WEB

Thousands of Vaccine Appointments Canceled as Supply Lags ...

New York Times

Drop in vaccine demand has some places turning down doses

Associated Press

COVID vaccine demand softens in some parts of Washington state ...

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Covid-19: About a Third of U.S. Adults Have Received at Least One ...

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