

COVID-19 Vaccine Promises New Day for America's Seniors

AMERICA'S SENIORS ARE WAITING eagerly for positive news on the development of a vaccine for COVID-19 and subsequent information on how they can receive the inoculations, searching for that proverbial light at the end of the tunnel and deliverance from the long and challenging months of coping with a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic.

Standing ready to help deliver this hope to seniors and specifically to those residing in seniors' housing are national leaders in vaccine delivery and distribution, Walgreens and PharMerica. These two organizations believe firmly that safe and effective vaccines offer the path forward for nursing homes and assisted living communities, and they have a plan in place to get the vaccine to those most in need of it in a rapid and safe manner.

Seniors-Directed Efforts

T.J. Griffin, senior vice president of long-term care operations and chief pharmacy officer for PharMerica, is also a member of the Operation Warp Speed program to bring one or more COVID-19 vaccines to market as soon as safely possible.

He says vaccine makers are doing their work with the most vulnerable populations in mind—seniors—and have increasingly included older participants in clinical trials still taking place, which will drive the data “to make us all feel comfortable.”

These data will inform how PharMerica educates its long term care clients on the vaccine, with pharmacists and doctors in the lead on ensuring communities grasp the importance of getting what will amount to safe and effective protection from COVID-19.

“I believe in vaccines, and I believe the way we help our skilled nursing and assisted living partners get back on their feet and make it safe for the public and our frontline staff is through this process,” Griffin says.

“The sector needs it, society needs it, and we need to get back to when folks stop going without health care and rehabilitation and feel safe to send moms and dads to these facilities. This is a real group effort by many, many stakeholders. No one is looking out for their own interests here, this is about saving lives. For us, this is about America, not PharMerica.”

Good News

And, if recent news on vaccine development is any indication, there is going to be a real push to implement the Walgreens and PharMerica plan to get seniors living in nursing homes

and assisted living and related care facilities inoculated at the earliest feasible time.

“On Nov. 9, Pfizer labs announced that their vaccine in Phase 3 trials was producing a 90 percent efficacy rate. While we will need further data, this level of efficacy is on par with our highly effective measles vaccines,” Griffin says. “This gives us hope that we can have a vaccine for our frail elderly and their heroic health care workers who care for them.”

A safe and effective vaccine is a big step to putting the long term and post-acute care sector back on its feet in many ways, starting with the health and wellness of the staff and their residents, he says.

Experience in Delivering Vaccines

Walgreens is a leader in providing immunizations to protect communities from vaccine-preventable diseases. Now, on the cusp of a breakthrough in the development of a safe and effective vaccine for COVID-19, PharMerica has joined with Walgreens to support and accelerate the administration of a vaccine.

Walgreens is working at the broadest level to support and accelerate the administration of COVID-19 vaccines, once available, collaborating closely with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the administration as part of Operation Warp Speed.

The pharmacy provider believes pharmacists can play an important role in helping increase vaccine distribution reach and capacity for an epidemic.

“With our nationwide footprint, trusted community presence, deep history in vaccine administration, and pharmacist expertise, Walgreens pharmacies will be critical to accelerating access to COVID-19 vaccines once they become available,” Griffin says.

Sharing Duties

This expertise in delivering vaccines and ability to collect individualized data are part of the reason PharMerica has such great expectations from its partnering with Walgreens, says Griffin.

This trust in what Walgreens can deliver, combined with PharMerica's knowledge of the senior housing business, is a combination that is poised to help deliver nursing homes and assisted living communities from the COVID-19 crisis and start the road to recovery.



reporting of the vaccine and take on the responsibility for the product they have paid for. Remember, there is no cost for the vaccine itself, the government is paying for it,” he says.

In turn, the PharMerica role when the vaccine or vaccines are approved for distribution will be to help schedule clinics, the events in which residents and staff of facilities receive the shots. Likely, there will be one vaccine to start with in 2021, and gradually a second and third added. Griffin thinks the entire long term care sector can be taken care of with the first vaccine, but that will all be determined by operational issues, like if there are enough doses manufactured.

“Walgreens will take the lead most times, and we will schedule directly with the facilities, coordinating consent forms, and organizing the day of clinics and work to supplement their staffing. Consultant pharmacists may be present, depending on the size of the clinic,” Griffin says.

PharMerica is also developing an outreach and education effort as well to inform families, residents, and staff of the safety and efficacy of the vaccine being given and has worked with Walgreens on understanding the unique aspects of long term care, like the fact residents often have to be immunized in their rooms and cannot come to a central location like a dining hall.

All Need the Vaccine

Griffin says it is important that all residents and staff be vaccinated for the process to work and noted that this includes the entire breadth of residential living in senior housing. An example he gives is that a woman resident in an independent living arrangement may have a husband in a neighboring complex housing people in memory care.

“She will still need to get the vaccine, even though she is not in the assisted living part” of the continuing care retirement community, Griffin says.

Even though there is no word yet on how and when a vaccine will be approved for use, he says the design of the overall program is that there will be three clinical visits to a facility to take care of all the immunization needs.

“There will be three clinics. So, one today on the day chosen to start, then one 21 days later, and then a third clinic at a later date to capture new admissions, new employees. The federal response will include these three distinct clinics,” he says.

“I look at their 10 years of experience in stores and delivering clinics and our connection this fall with some 200 flu clinics, and it all comes back to their professionalism. They do a really good job,” he says.

“We have years of experience sending flu vaccines to facilities, but they have not been patient-specific. Because of the speed at which this vaccine [multiple vaccines] is being developed, the vaccinations have to be individually recorded so that any adverse events get reported by the facility. This will all be recorded in the CDC system, and this is where Walgreens' abilities will come to bear.”

Strong Network of Workers

Griffin notes that Walgreens has some 20,000 staff around the country delivering vaccinations to the public, and PharMerica has 250 consultant pharmacists to manage the 325,000 patients the company takes care of every day.

“We could not get it done by ourselves, and the federal government wants a one-stop shop for the administration and