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The Problem of the Covid Response

FRESNO—Distribution of the Covid vaccine to residents of Fresno County has begun, but like in many other places across the nation so far the effort has been characterized by few sites, long lines, unclear information and unpredictable supplies. The overstressed employees administering the vaccine do not themselves know whether appointments are required, who exactly they should allow to receive it and when their next shipment of supplies will arrive.

Although much of this disorder comes from the departing Trump administration's unbelievably incompetent and blatantly harmful federal approach to the pandemic over the past year, our state and county level responses also leave much to be desired.

Once vaccine availability expanded beyond essential medical workers, the first category of the public to receive the doses was to be those people 75 and older. However, within a few days that guideline was quietly and inconsistently dropped to people 65 and older.

Word of this change spread in advance of any modification to government sites, spreading through church congregations and other social circles from people "in the know"—informal communication networks of people with family members in the right place and Fresnoans with boutique doctors.

Then the age cutoff swung back to 75 as it was revealed the departing Trump administration lied about having a stockpile of vaccines it would soon hand out to the states. Whether this is another case of profitless malice, simple compounding incompetence or coverup for some yet unearthed graft is yet to be determined.

We can expect there to be new big swings in policy in the coming weeks as the incoming Biden administration gets a grasp on the true shape of what has been happening. But for now, California seems to be on its own.

The Fresno Fairgrounds operates as the single government administered vaccine for the county, with appointments disappearing from the County Vaccine website an instant after a new batch is opened. Long lines of people waiting in cars beside the road stretched for miles around the North Fresno locations of Sierra Pacific Orthopedics Center and United Health Centers.

Wait times were estimated to be up to six hours, where there were still stocks of the vaccine to give out. People 65 and older have been told that it could easily be June until they get a chance at a first vaccine dose. In the meantime, they remain amid a confused population who can see this uncertain implementation further damaging vital public trust in science, medicine and basic human decency.

Placing the burden of figuring out how to get the vaccine on those most vulnerable to the disease is completely backward. The global health community has a century of experience in exactly this type of issue: distributing vaccines to eliminate a specific disease. We have done so for smallpox and polio all over the world, even in the most remote, ill-educated and dysfunctional areas, which our country is unfortunately beginning to resemble.

The logistical lessons have been learned, but our response in the United States seems to completely ignore all that and instead opts for a policy focused on individual responsibility and private companies. Currently, our infection rate and death toll, the highest in the world, shows we are the backward country in dire need of help. There needs to be leadership, public responsibility and technical expertise at the helm.

The United States' uniquely disastrous response to the pandemic has been characterized by this abdication of responsibility down the ladder and has left us with the greatest number of Covid victims of any country on the planet.

The Trump administration left states to design their own responses. State governments are reluctant to issue orders or design guidance and instead delegate counties to decide how to deal with the problem. It goes all the way down to police department leaders, such as our new Fresno Police Chief Balderrama, who say they will not enforce mask mandates and that instead it is the responsibility of individual businesses to implement that basic public health measure. All to avoid flak from people like Fresno's Ben Martin, who organize anti-mask protests to harass places (and customers) that try to limit further deaths and injury.

There has been a serious problem in how American culture has reacted to the possibility and now presence of the Covid vaccine. This treatment has primarily been pitched through selfish motives, "Take this and you will not get sick." That tactic has led many people in lower-risk categories for complications to become excessively hesitant, weighing their chance of dangerous infection against an amorphous blob of imaginary risks.

However, this is a pandemic. Our primary concern should not be our own personal fortune but rather the lives and welfare of literally everyone around us. The Covid response should be phrased in terms of self-responsibility and self-sacrifice.

The Biden administration is in office now, but they need to do more than just sift through the web of lies and incompetence left behind. Democrats need to address the failure of our government to protect and provide for its citizens.

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