

N.Y.'s Vaccine Websites Weren't Working. He Built a New One for \$50.

New Yorkers with tech skills were appalled when they tried to make vaccine appointments for older relatives. They knew there was a better way.



By Sharon Otterman

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Huge Ma, a 31-year-old software engineer for Airbnb, was stunned when he tried to make a coronavirus vaccine appointment for his mother in early January and saw that there were dozens of websites to check, each with its own sign-up protocol. The city and state appointment systems were completely distinct.

“There has to be a better way,” he said he remembered thinking.

So, he developed one. In less than two weeks, he launched TurboVax, a free website that compiles availability from the three main city and state New York vaccine systems and sends the information in real time to Twitter. It cost Mr. Ma less than \$50 to build, yet it offers an easier way to spot appointments than the city and state’s official systems do.

“It’s sort of become a challenge to myself, to prove what one person with time and a little motivation can do,” he said last week. “This wasn’t a priority for governments, which was unfortunate. But everyone has a role to play in the pandemic, and I’m just doing the very little that I can to make it a little bit easier.”

Supply shortages and problems with access to vaccination appointments have been some of the barriers to the equitable distribution of the vaccine in New York City and across the United States, officials have acknowledged.

Statistics released recently by the city showed that the vaccine is disproportionately flowing to white New Yorkers, not the Black and brown communities that suffered the most in the pandemic’s first wave.

Only 12 percent of the roughly 210,000 city residents who are over 65 and were vaccinated were Black, for example, even though Black people make up 24 percent of the city’s population.

“The only way they are able to access those appointments is to use a very, very complicated tech platform that in and of itself marginalizes the elderly community that I serve,” Eboné Carrington, the chief executive officer of Harlem Hospital, said at the end of last month. As a result, she said, white people from outside Harlem for weeks had filled most of her available slots.

So some volunteers in New York, as well as in states including Texas, California and Massachusetts, have tried to use their technological skills to simplify that process.

Jeremy Novich, 35, a clinical psychologist on the Upper West Side on Manhattan, started reaching out to seniors after realizing that his own older relatives could not have made appointments on their own.

“The system is set up to be a technology race between 25-year-olds and 85-year-olds,” he said. “That’s not a race, that’s elder neglect.”

Along with two friends, on Jan. 12 he launched the Vaccine Appointment Assistance Team, a person-to-person effort that began by helping older people from local synagogues and expanded to help those who sign up via a phone hotline or web form. Because of high demand, the service — which now has 20 volunteer caseworkers — has stopped taking new cases for now, and the founders are thinking about partnering with a nonprofit to increase capacity.

The most ambitious online volunteer assistance effort in the city is NYC Vaccine List, a website that compiles appointments from more than 50 vaccination sites — city, state and private. About 20 volunteers write code, reach out to community organizations and call inoculation centers directly to post the centers’ availabilities.



Dan Benamy, a software developer for Datadog and one of NYC Vaccine List's founders, said that when he was searching last month for dates for his grandparents, he was struck at how labor-intensive the appointment system was.

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“I’m an engineer and an optimizer, so I was looking at this and saying it feels like we could maybe look at pulling this data together and aggregating it, so that it is faster and easier to find vaccines,” he said.

Mr. Benamy reached out to a couple of friends and got to work. The site went live five days later, on Jan. 16.

Inspired by VaccinateCA, a volunteer-run vaccine finder site in California, NYC Vaccine List not only lists available city and state appointments, but also allows users to click through more directly to some available appointment times, saving precious minutes in which a slot could go to someone else.

In its effectiveness, the site is also offering a real-time glimpse at how brutally competitive the appointment process can be. At 2:30 p.m. on Jan. 28, for example, hundreds of openings popped up, including 45 at the city’s Brooklyn Army Marine Terminal, and many more at a city-run site in the Bronx. Within 15 minutes, they were gone.

These sites do not solve all access problems, because they still require computer literacy and benefit only those who know about them. As of Feb. 8, NYC Vaccine List was getting about 16,000 visitors a day, which remains a fraction of the millions of qualified New Yorkers who need appointments, its founders said.

But by making the process more efficient, the sites are easing the way for hundreds who were struggling to find a slot. Their Twitter feed has been flooded with messages of gratitude, and NYC Vaccine List been labeled the “hottest website” in the city by Mark Levine, a city councilman. They recently added a Google translate feature to the site.

“As the number of volunteers increases and we get these basic pieces up and running, we would love to make it accessible to as many people as possible,” said Mr. Benamy, 36, who lives in Brooklyn.

Mayor Bill de Blasio has promised to improve the appointment system, which he called “too cumbersome” in a recent news conference, and the city upgraded one of its main scheduling sites to be more user-friendly last week.

Both the city and state also offer the option to schedule by phone. The state’s hotline recently added a special option for people 75 years and older, as well as a callback service. But operators at those hotlines make appointments at the same city or state run centers where most appointments are snapped up by those using the first-come, first serve web-based system.

Software developers peeking under the hood of some of the public scheduling sites were surprised to see just how messy it was back there. Paul Schreiber, 42, a freelance software engineer in Brooklyn, said he was chagrined to find misspellings and other errors in the code of the vaccine hub run for the first month by the city health department. The new website that rolled out on Feb. 1, he said, seemed “substantially better.”

“Even grading on a very generous curve — well, this is a government website, it’s not Amazon.com — it was really bad,” he said.

Mr. Schreiber has done some preliminary work on building his own appointment site and was looking at how he could incorporate the updates to the city-run site.



Adriana Scamparini helped others schedule vaccinations and received flowers, cards and gratitude. Amir Hamja for The New York Times

Some of the technological help has come from pure chance.

Adriana Scamparini, 45, a corporate lawyer who lives in the Gramercy area of Manhattan, spent 18 hours trying to make her father an appointment. After she did, she realized that a password she had used for an appointment site was saved on her phone, allowing her to bypass a public page that incorrectly stated no appointments were available.

She began reaching out to friends, family and her doorman to see if they knew older people who needed help. She set up email addresses for those who didn’t have them. She printed out appointment forms and delivered them to people’s homes. She made about 30 appointments and personally accompanied seven people to a vaccination site in Lower Manhattan, mostly in the middle of the night when appointments were easier to get. For her efforts, she got tears of gratitude, cards and flowers.

“I don’t have a computer and I don’t have Wi-Fi,” said Mariley Carlota, a widow originally from Brazil who lives alone on the Upper East Side. She got her first shot at 4:30 a.m. on Jan. 19 thanks to Ms. Scamparini. “She was like an angel for me.”

Ms. Carlota had been scared to go to the doctor and go shopping. Now, she is scheduling her colonoscopy, her endoscopy and physical therapy for February. She cries at the thought that she will soon be able to go back to her church and her

friends there.

“It’s like I won a lottery,” she said.