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Walberg Family Pharmacies prepare to administer vaccine

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By CALEB STRIGHT

Hospitals across the country, including UPMC, started administering the historic COVID-19 vaccine Monday, and soon after, nursing homes will receive them.

Next on the list are retail pharmacies, including Walberg Family Pharmacies. Although the company doesn't yet know when it will receive its doses, owner Bretton Walberg said they've received confirmation they will be receiving them. "We're ready," he said. "It's going to take every single healthcare provider in our town and in our state to be prepared to immunize all those folks."

And there's plenty to prepare for.

"It's really much more involved than giving a shot," Walberg said.

There's patient tracking, and following up with those that receive the vaccine to see if they're having adverse reactions, then reporting that information.

It's also not just one shot. For the vaccine to be fully effective, recipients will have to get a second dose within weeks.

As of Monday, only the vaccine from Pfizer was going out, but a second vaccine from Moderna was expected to receive federal approval this week. Both vaccines have to be kept at very low temperatures.

The Pfizer vaccine is to be kept at minus 70C (minus 94F), and the company encourages keeping them in ultra-cold freezers, which Walberg said are currently very difficult, if not



Walberg

impossible, to purchase.

Pfizer, though, also ships doses in sophisticated containers that use dry ice that will keep vaccines for up to 15 days, which includes recharging the dry ice.

“These containers are so sophisticated,” Walberg said. “Their lids have GPS trackers and temperature monitors.”

Once the vaccines are put in a refrigerator, they have to be used within a matter of hours.

The Moderna vaccine requires only minus 20C (minus 4F), for which Walberg pharmacies currently have equipment.

Once doses come in to Walberg pharmacies, Walberg said, the vaccine won’t require a prescription, and there will be no charge to the patient. The pharmacy will bill the patient’s insurance, but patients without insurance will also be able to receive it.

Walberg anticipates a long waiting list, and will be putting together a process for administering the doses, even if that means holding clinics on weekends.

"We're going to do our very best to give as many immunizations as we can," he said.

As to when he expects to hear more news, Walberg said it may come suddenly.

The pharmacy chain with locations in the Greenville, Jamestown, Reynolds areas, and across the region, also signed up for COVID-19 testing through the Pa. Department of Health, and after not hearing anything for a time, the company received a FedEx box of testing materials and a call with instructions of what to do next. Walberg said he understands people having concerns and questions about the vaccine, but he said he'd encourage people to get it.

"I truly believe the FDA would not put out something that wasn't safe," he said, adding that not only will it protect the recipients and those around them, but help society return to normal.

National health officials say roughly 70 percent of the population will have to receive the vaccine to reach broad protection through herd immunity.

"I would encourage everyone to get it," Walberg said. "It comes down to protecting those around us."

Walberg pharmacies continue to offer COVID-19 tests, which are free to the public. Those looking to get tested just have to register at doineedacovid19test.com