

# Covid-19 Vaccines Mean an End to Isolation at a Retirement Home

*Residents mingle with each other for the first time in months and look forward to seeing family from whom they have long been cut off*

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By Jim Carlton for The Wall Street Journal

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**PORTOLA VALLEY, Calif.**—Minutes after getting his first dose of a Covid-19 vaccine, Stanton Goldstein had one hope in mind: visiting his dementia-addled wife who has been isolated for months in the same retirement community.

“They better come up with a good reason I can’t see her now,” the 78-year-old retired physician said outside a community meeting room of The Sequoias Portola Valley, where dozens of residents were inoculated earlier this month to the sounds of big-band music.

Directors of the 315-person facility say it likely will be weeks before in-person visits between residents in different levels of care can resume because of the area’s high rate of [Covid-19 infections](#). Six of the facility’s residents and 34 staff members have been infected, with one hospitalization and no deaths.

With long-term care homes now at the front of the line for coronavirus vaccines, an end to the often-debilitating isolation for millions of seniors is in sight, industry executives say.

“This is the beginning of the light at the end of the tunnel for us,” said Bradley Dubin, principal of Kandu Capital LLC, which owns and operates nine Bloom Senior Living communities in the eastern U.S.

Residents and workers have been given priority because they have been so severely affected. More than 550,000 long-term care residents have been diagnosed with Covid-19, and about 100,000 have died, a quarter of the U.S.’s more than 400,000 deaths from the pandemic, according to federal data. Among workers at long-term care facilities such as nurses and cleaners, 472,000 have been infected, and 1,340 have died.

Staff have been more hesitant to take the vaccine, however, and their participation rates vary widely, health officials say. In Atlanta, officials of nursing-home operator A.G. Rhodes said a third of the 558 staff at their three area nursing homes have agreed to be vaccinated, compared with 57% of the 273 residents.

“What we’re hearing from staff...is a feeling that the vaccine is ‘too new’ or that it was ‘rushed,’” A.G. Rhodes spokeswoman Mary Newton said in an email.

Nationally, 95% of the U.S.'s more than 15,000 nursing homes expect to complete their first round of inoculations by the end of the month, according to the American Health Care Association. Second doses will follow in three to four weeks.

The rollout is uneven, with some areas more successful thus far than others.

In Los Angeles County, two thirds of the 350 nursing homes have vaccinated residents with at least one dose, said Deborah Pacyna, spokeswoman for the California Association of Health Facilities. Staffing shortages because of sickness are a major reason the nursing homes there are seeing slower vaccinations, she said.

The rollout Jan. 15 at The Sequoias Portola Valley, located 40 miles south of San Francisco, went smoothly. Nurses shepherded residents from an outside waiting area with chairs 6 feet apart into a large room where pharmacists from CVS administered the shots. They were monitored for 15 minutes in case of any adverse reactions. None was reported.

Most other residents were in an ebullient mood, seeing friends for the first time since the latest lockdown began in November. Gatherings, including communal dining, were suspended, and outside visits were suspended.

“We’ve all been stuck in our apartments, so finally we can see everyone congregating,” 83-year-old Joann Lazar said.

After California Gov. Gavin Newsom on Monday [lifted his stay-at-home order](#) affecting most of the state, directors of The Sequoias said they would allow outside visits to resume with plexiglass and other protections.

Only a handful of staff and residents have declined to take the vaccine, said Rob Hays, The Sequoias’ executive director.

Head nurse Christine Juan said that during the pandemic, she has had to take precautions to protect her family from possible exposure. Such measures, she said, included sleeping in a separate room from her husband and wearing a mask inside her home when she came down with a sore throat and runny nose that turned out not to be from the coronavirus.

In agreeing to get the shots, she said she did worry about possible adverse reactions because of social-media posts she saw but decided to trust it was safe because of the scientific analysis. “The next day I got a sore arm and a mild headache but later felt fine,” Ms. Juan said.

Isolation from family and friends has been one of the hardest parts of the pandemic, nursing home residents said. In addition to not seeing his wife, Helen, since November, Dr. Goldstein hasn’t seen his two daughters and their families since August.

“My dad tries to put a good face on it, but it is something that causes him anger,” said his daughter, Elizabeth Karnes, 49.

Dr. Goldstein said he considered violating the rules to spend Thanksgiving at Ms. Karnes's house nearby. But he thought better of it and is now glad he did, as two members of her household tested positive for the virus days later.

Ms. Goldstein, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease, recently received her first vaccine dose as well.

"I sit in my apartment and wonder what she's doing," Dr. Goldstein said, wringing his hands. Looking at Mr. Hays, who came over to say hello, the retiree announced his plan, if he isn't allowed to visit his wife soon: "I'm going to park myself in your office after my second shot."

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