

# Travel Can't Recover Until US Solves Last-Mile Vaccination Problem



Michael Goldstein Contributor    
Travel



ANAHEIM, CA - JANUARY 13: A temporary COVID-19 vaccine super site is set up at the north of the Toy ... [+] MEDIANEWS GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The travel industry should be ready to start feeling good. Although there have been [400,000](#) deaths and 24 million cases in the United States alone, COVID-19 vaccine rollout has begun. But 'last-mile' problems of distribution and sluggish city and state response has slowed vaccination programs across the country.

The US Travel Association (USTA) [calls the rollout](#) “a long-awaited light at the end of the pandemic tunnel, bringing to life the number one assurance travelers need—a vaccine.” One [survey says](#) 54% of Americans would feel comfortable traveling abroad just six months after vaccines become available, kicking off the summer travel season on Memorial Day. But the USTA acknowledge the “impacts uncertainty around vaccine distribution and accessibility have on consumer confidence.”

Unfortunately, that chain has faltered in its last mile. As of January 19, according to [official CDC data](#) a total of 31,161,075 doses of COVID-19 vaccine had been distributed, but just 12,279,180 doses had been administered, an anemic 39%.

Planning for vaccine distribution has been uneven, to say the least. Each US state was required to file a COVID-19 vaccination plan with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). But a [quick check](#) of the state plans shows many that read “draft, interim or simply “this site can’t be reached.”

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Add to this confusion about who gets priority for the vaccine, a shortage of trained health care workers to administer it, state governments claiming a lack of funds, and a reluctance among some groups and needle-fearing individuals to take it, and you have quite a different problem than the initial shortage of vaccine. The CDC has expanded vaccine eligibility to [anyone over age of 65](#) while states from [Alabama](#) to Washinnton struggle to persuade front-line workers to get vaccinated. Only 60% of the LA Fire Department has been vaccinated, and the chief has resorted to raffling gift cards and bikes as encouragement.



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“People who want a vaccine can’t get it, some counties have more than others and older people are camping out for it the way they once might have for tickets to a Bruce Springsteen concert,” wrote Dr. Anna Nagurney, a Professor in the Department of Operations and Information Management at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

In a sense, the travel industry has already gotten a boost from last-mile US failures. “Right now there are folks flying in from other countries to get vaccinated in the US and succeeding,” Dr. Nagurney told Forbes.

The perception of shortage (or inefficient federal distribution) is so intense that NY Governor Cuomo recently sent a letter to Pfizer asking if the state could buy its own COVID-19 vaccine. “I think we’ve already had too much of a patchwork response across the states,” responded Dr. Celine Gounder, a health advisor to the incoming Biden administration.

The states “never planned for the human capital resources and training that would be needed for administering the vaccine. The same holds for the development of robust scheduling mechanisms and the IT required,” says Dr. Nagurney, a logistics expert. “Venues should have been identified and contracts placed, so that they would be ready in time and meet social distancing requirements, plus support the 15-minute observation period for each vaccinated person.”

In New York, “We are far, far behind where we need to be,” said Health Committee Chairman Mark Levine. “We should be vaccinating 400,000 people a week.”



Or take California. In 2019 the state had [279 million visitors](#) with total travel spending of over \$144.3 billion. While the pandemic decimated such numbers in 2020, 2021 was looking brighter with the arrival of the vaccines. But the [SF Chronicle](#) revealed that California had nearly 2 million unused doses of vaccine. California Assemblyman Kevin Kiley tweeted, “California is currently 49th in vaccine distribution.”

To turn such situations around, “It is imperative to be vaccinating 24/7 since these are time-sensitive, perishable products that cannot be left out of the fridge for long,” says Dr. Nagurney. “If there are ‘some extra doses ‘at the end of the day, there should be procedures in place for notifying folks in a reasonably fair and equitable manner.”

Instead, “The L.A. County Dept. of Public Health is allowing clinics to throw unused vaccines in the trash, according to entertainment website TMZ. A health clinic in Inglewood was set to give vaccines to health care workers. But hundreds were no-shows, leaving the clinic with 150 unused vials of COVID vaccine that were about to spoil .

The clinic started calling people who were not on the official priority list but wanted the vaccine. Although they [got the remaining](#) vaccine, Health Department guidelines were apparently violated. Pressed by TMZ, the County would only say they ‘won’t prosecute’ the clinic.

Unfortunately, similar stories have been shared from around the country. Despite such bureaucracy, President-elect Biden has said he plans [deliver 100 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine](#) within the first 100 days of his presidency.

But there is a huge difference between the words “deliver” and “administer.” For such a plan to succeed, Dr. Nagurney says the solutions are simple. “More guidance and resources from the top; 24/7 vaccination campaigns at readily accessible, safe venues; better messaging and sign-up appointment mechanisms, and making sure that those receiving the vaccines to administer are informed ahead of time as to when they will arrive and at what volumes.”

For the travel industry to move forward the states must solve last-mile problems and implement a system for mass administration of the vaccine.



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