

## 'The first step toward normal': COVID-19 vaccine arrives at Milwaukee-area nursing homes

[Sarah Volpenhein](#) - Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

For most, it was a day they had been anxiously awaiting, a step toward normalcy.

The COVID-19 vaccine arrived this week at Shorehaven, a senior living community that offers skilled nursing, assisted living and other long-term care, in Oconomowoc.

Nursing home residents were wheeled into Shorehaven's Great Room on Monday morning, where they lined up, ready to go behind a curtain and receive the first shot of the two-dose Moderna regimen.

"I didn't have to think about it. I knew I was going to get" the vaccine, said Maxine Aarestad, a resident in Shorehaven's nursing home.

"It's a dream come true. I've been waiting for this for a long time," Shorehaven employee Sarah Stearns said of the vaccine's arrival.

The scene has played out across Wisconsin this week, as the state nears completion of the first round of doses in nursing homes. Nursing home residents are among the most vulnerable to COVID-19 because of their close living quarters and because of their age and underlying medical conditions.

For those nursing homes that have largely escaped widespread outbreaks of COVID-19, the timing of the vaccine is a godsend.

At Shorehaven, only two residents have reportedly contracted the virus, according to data reported to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. One died from COVID-19.

In Wisconsin, nearly 90% of the state's roughly 350 nursing homes have reported at least one case of a resident contracting COVID-19. In all, more than 7,100 nursing home residents in Wisconsin have been infected and more than 1,400 have died with COVID-19, according to the latest data reported to CMS.

That's more than a quarter of all COVID-19 deaths in Wisconsin.

### Eager to get back to normal



The vaccine doesn't mean nursing homes can immediately go back to the way things were. Nursing home officials still don't know when they can welcome back visitors, when they can relax mask-wearing requirements or when they can ease up on testing.

But for many, the vaccine is a signal that a return to normalcy is coming.

What employees said they are most hopeful for is to welcome visitors back to their facilities, to allow families to see their loved ones face-to-face, not just through a window or on a computer screen.

"It's been very, very hard on the residents," said Celeste Klaus, a licensed practical nurse who has worked at Shorehaven for nearly 40 years. "And then if you take someone that has dementia and then throw the pandemic in, it just can't be described. One day, they'll do fine. The next day, in their confusion, 'Why isn't anyone seeing me?'"

Almost all of the Shorehaven residents eligible to receive the vaccine on Monday got it, including 84 skilled nursing and rehab residents, 14 in memory care and 10 enhanced assisted living residents, said Sarah Williams-Berg, director of community relations.





Other assisted living residents on the Shorehaven campus will not receive the vaccine until later. Nursing home residents were given priority by the state over assisted living ones. A smaller percentage of staff got the vaccine: 164 employees, or about 60% of the skilled nursing and assisted living employees, Williams-Berg said.

Long-term care employees have been more hesitant to get the vaccine than residents, according to officials with Walgreens and CVS, the pharmacy chains administering the vaccine through a federal program to inoculate nursing home and assisted living residents and staff across the country.

Emily Karls, the administrator at Shorehaven, said her employees have mixed emotions about the vaccine, some of them "so excited" to get it and others "terrified" of possible long-term side effects.

"No one is reacting to this quite the same way," she said.

For employees who are young and healthy, she said there is little incentive for them to get the vaccine. Health care officials have said that even if someone gets the vaccine and is protected from falling ill to COVID-19, they could still be a carrier of the virus.

But long-term care providers hope that as the vaccine rolls out, more employees will be open to getting the vaccine. Shorehaven employees who did not get the vaccine Monday will have the chance to get a first shot when Walgreens pharmacists return to the facility to administer second shots.

State officials have not answered questions about how many in long-term care have been vaccinated through the federal program so far, but [CVS Health had reported](#) administering a little more than 11,400 first doses to long-term care residents and staff in Wisconsin during 128 visits, as of Monday. Walgreens has not released state-by-state data on doses administered through the program.

The pharmacy chains have said they expect to finish first doses in nursing homes [by Jan. 25](#).

### **'We see what this virus can do'**

Officials at Congregational Home, a nursing home and senior living facility in Brookfield, were eager to get the vaccine as soon as possible and had Walgreens pharmacists at the nursing home last Saturday.

"It's just the first step toward getting back to normal," said Catherine Solakian, director of admissions and marketing. "We want our residents and families to be together. We don't want to be worried every day that we're going to get sick or come in and infect patients. That's always a constant worry in the back of our minds."

Congregational Home has had 11 cases of residents contracting the virus, Solakian said, and one nursing home resident has died with the virus.

Solakian knows it could be worse, and that's why Saturday was so important. Bright-colored balloons festooned the booths where pharmacists were giving shots, upbeat music played and streamers hung in the outside hallway where a poster board was set up showcasing residents' and employees' reasons for getting the vaccine.

"We see what this virus can do," she said. "We've done pretty well in our building with keeping the numbers low, but we've still had cases. ... No matter how hard you work to keep the virus out, it's an insidious virus. It can make its way in."

Diane Heup, a resident in rehab, did not have to think twice about getting the vaccine.

"I'm 80 years old and I don't want to fool around with landing in the hospital," she said.

Heup had a stroke in October and has been at Congregational Home since November, learning how to walk again.

The hardest part of the pandemic has been not seeing her husband. She said the only communication they have with each other is over the phone.

It's residents like Heup, who are undergoing rehab, that most need their families, said Chelsey Abeln, a rehab social worker at Congregational Home.

"Their families know them best, and their families know what they do every day and how to help get them back to where that was," she said.

Abeln said she was relieved by news of the vaccine, but had to think about it before deciding to get it herself. She was worried about whether it would affect her ability to have more children.

Joyce Kneeland, a resident, also got the shot Saturday. She said she initially wasn't scheduled to get the vaccine because she is an assisted living resident. Nursing home residents are the first priority.

But when she was offered the chance, she took it, knowing that her daughters wanted her to.

"At my age, what have I got to lose?" she said.

*Sarah Volpenhein is a Report for America corps reporter who focuses on news of value to underserved communities for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. Email her at [svolpenhei@gannett.com](mailto:svolpenhei@gannett.com). Please consider supporting journalism that informs our democracy with a tax-deductible gift to this reporting effort at [JSOnline.com/RFA](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/2020/07/24/covid-19-vaccine-eligibility-when-to-get-it/8302870002).*