

Thousands of US elderly line up for flu shots

A reporting team
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In cities across the US, thousands of people, mostly elderly and many using canes, walkers, or wheelchairs, are standing in line for hours to receive a flu shot. The announcement that a clinic, a hospital or even a supermarket has a quantity of vaccine and will make it available invariably produces a rush of people anxious to get their shot before the supply is exhausted.

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania last Wednesday, the Allegheny County Health Department set up a giant tent in the parking lot of the Pittsburgh Steelers football stadium to distribute flu shots. According to security guards, many people started lining up at 5 and 6 am, hours before the first injections were given. By lunchtime, the line had grown to nearly half a mile. It filled the tent and stretched along two sides of the giant parking lot and halfway along a third side.

People leaving the tent said they had waited two hours and pointed to the spot where they began their ordeal. In two hours the length of the line had doubled.

“This is outrageous,” said Barbara Linder, who had just arrived with her husband to get a shot. “If Bush hadn’t spent billions in Iraq and would let people get good health care, we wouldn’t be having these problems.”

Both Mrs. Linder and her husband walked with difficulty as they tried to make their way to the end of the line. “It is going to take us 15 minutes just to walk to the end of the line, and then we are going to have to wait for hours just to get this shot,” she said. “I will never be able to stand for that long.

“We spend billions on a war that never should have been fought, but we can’t take care of the people here. Before they spend money on a war, they could take care of the people here who need health care, the people who need food, and the people who need a place to sleep at night.”

Many people carried oxygen bottles as they waited in line. When a WSWs reporter arrived, one elderly

woman, clearly disoriented, was trying to lift herself onto the trunk of a car to sit down. She told the reporter that she felt sick and could not find the van in which she had come. Nor could she find her daughter, who was holding her place in line. Unable to climb onto the car, she ended up sitting on the bumper, lowering her head until she felt a bit better.

Marc Connelly, who was standing halfway between the tent and the back of the line, said, “This should have been organized better. They had the vaccine, why couldn’t they have given it out to the doctors in local areas so people could get the shot all over the city and county? I have waited half an hour in my car just to get into the parking lot and one hour and forty minutes so far in line.”

Pat Gunderman and her husband Warren had been waiting nearly two hours and had moved only half the distance to the tent entrance. “I think it is ridiculous that we have to do this,” she said. “Why not split it up and have several locations where people could go? The Steelers are making a big deal that they are donating use of the parking lot tent, but then we have to pay \$5 to park.

“We are fortunate to have good insurance and it pays for most of our medical expenses. I don’t know how long that is going to last if Bush gets reelected. I feel for the people who don’t have insurance. Where do they go? Every time they get sick they end up going to a clinic or the emergency room, never seeing the same doctor and always waiting a long time like this to get anything.”

Arlene Carlisle said, “It’s nice weather, it hasn’t been raining and we have the rail to sit on, so it hasn’t been too bad for me. I feel for the old people with walkers, wheelchairs and canes who have to stay out here waiting like this.

“I am for socialized medicine. I am tired of paying high insurance premiums and hospital bills. There is no

reason people can't have health care. It should be a basic right. The drug and insurance companies make billions, but they can't make medicines affordable for people when they get sick."

The WSWs also interviewed a 65-year-old woman who was waiting Friday for a flu vaccination at the Chelsea Health Center in New York City. She said, "I didn't get a flu shot this afternoon because they told me there were no numbers left. I have to come back here early Monday morning, and hope I get a number that will allow me to receive the vaccine. I may not get one because they told me they have only so many shots available.

"I tried to get a flu shot from my own doctor, but he had none available. I went to the Jewish Community Center, but they did not receive any vaccine. I called the New York City health hotline, and they told me to come to this location. It is very important that I get a flu shot. I am 65, and I have multiple sclerosis. My immune system is very much compromised. If I get the flu, I may die.

"I agree with you that this situation was created by the economics and politics of the pharmaceutical companies and their need for profits. This is why only two companies do this kind of work for Americans.

"I take this personally because I have a disability that affects a quarter of a million people. The pharmaceutical companies consider this too small a number to interest them in developing drugs for the disease. As a result, the research they do is very limited. It's all about business.

"It's hard to be in someone else's shoes. I was a very healthy person for most of my life. For the young and healthy, it's hard to know how it feels to have my kind of disability. I asked my neurologist if I should get a flu shot, and he said that I must get one, or I will be in big trouble."



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