West Virginia leads the nation in distributions of the COVID-19 vaccine, here’s why.

By Woody Crisfield

Despite being one of the nation’s most rural, and economically disadvantaged states, West Virginia has been able to vaccinate its residents at a much higher rate than the rest of the nation.

Photo: (Melissa Moore/Trekaroo)

When the first American received the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine on December 14, many Americans were optimistic that the tide was finally turning in the war against COVID-19. Since that point however, the federal government has fallen way short of its initial projections in December. Nationwide, as of January 21, 18.4 million shots have been administered, which is just 3% of the total population.

A lack of federal guidance, along with key logistical problems have caused the initial allotment of COVID vaccine doses to lose their effectiveness. Yet, in spite of the mismanagement in vaccine distributions by the federal government, one unlikely success story at the state level has emerged, that of West Virginia.
West Virginia leads all other states in the percentage of its population that has received a vaccination. As of January 17, over 130,100 first doses have been administered in the Mountaineer state with 23,066 residents having received both doses of the vaccine. Some 55,800 shots have been given to those over the age of 65 in the state which has a population of 1,792 million, according to the state’s Department of Health and Human resources.

The reason behind the state’s rapid vaccination success is in large part due to Governor Jim Justice’s decision for his state to opt out of a federal program which relied solely on CVS and Walgreens to administer the COVID vaccine. Instead, Justice chose to partner with 250 small and independent pharmacies to administer the state’s vaccine supply.

According to numerous state health officials, the federal plan wasn't going to be effective in West Virginia, as the state has very few CVS and Walgreens locations to adequately handle the demand for the vaccine. Furthermore, most nursing homes and long term care facilities, especially in the state’s most rural communities, had already partnered with small and independent pharmacies to test their residents for COVID. Thus, for Governor Justice, it made sense to continue the relationships with these small and independent pharmacies.

The rest of the nation struggled with the bureaucratic of using solely the national pharmacy chains. Some of the branches of these pharmacies seemed to lack the incentive to vaccinate swiftly. The partnership with the smaller pharmacies gave West Virginia direct control over the flow of vaccinations and allowed the state to adapt to any unforeseen circumstances.

Thus, the West Virginia vaccination model could be what the 49 other states might look to emulate if the nation at large is to overcome COVID-19 quickly. Vaccination partnerships with the large chains could fall short of the federal government's initial, expected projections.