



## Coronavirus

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# US healthcare workers protest chaos in hospitals' vaccine rollout

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Frontline healthcare workers saw their hopes dashed last week when a botched algorithm, crashing scheduling platforms and other logistical mishaps thwarted their efforts to be among the first in the US to receive a long-awaited [coronavirus vaccine](#).

Amid [a surge in infections](#) overwhelming hospitals around the US, doctors were incensed by administrative failures

that denied access to the potentially life-saving shots, even as they volunteered to work in intensive care units or looked after the critically ill.

Christine Santiago is an internal medicine resident with Stanford Health Care in California, where ICU availability is at 2% statewide.

“I think that there’s a sense of disappointment in not really being considered,” she said, “despite sort of being held up as like, you know, ‘healthcare heroes’, and being on the frontlines.

“Maybe it was just words.”

More than 100 Stanford doctors protested on Friday, standing up for respiratory therapists, environmental services workers, nursing staff, residents and fellows who interact with patients. They were unable to lay claim to initial doses of the vaccine, even as they learned that employees doing telehealth from home had nabbed slots.

“Healthcare heroes, support is zero,” the protesters chanted.

## **// We got crushed by a boulder of operational failure**

### **George Alba, Massachusetts General Hospital**

Residents - doctors completing their training after medical school - were especially frustrated because they were being asked to volunteer for the Covid ICU but Stanford’s algorithm was not prioritizing them for vaccination.

Ronald Witteles, program director at Stanford’s internal medicine residency program, tweeted that the vaccine rollout “was an absolute mess” and “one of the most upsetting 24 hours I have ever experienced”.

Stanford Medicine said it took “complete responsibility for the errors in the execution of our vaccine distribution plan”, which it was “immediately revising”.

“Our intent was to develop an ethical and equitable process for distribution of the vaccine,” the statement said. “We apologize to our entire community,

including our residents, fellows, and other frontline care providers, who have performed heroically during our pandemic response.”

On the east coast, doctors in Boston’s Mass General Brigham system were also distraught. After the online scheduling platform crashed, employees filed into a long line on Thursday morning to sign up for shots in-person. But staff in emergency departments couldn’t abandon their patients. Once appointments came back online, availability vanished in minutes, a rush one physician likened to buying tickets to see Taylor Swift.

“It has converted it [into] almost like a parking spot, you know?” said the doctor, who spoke on condition of anonymity. “It’s almost become an employee perk that everyone’s rushing to get as soon as they can.”

In an email to leadership that was ultimately not sent, the physician described how “employee was pitted against employee in a dystopian race” and how “what should have been a moment of triumph for medicine and the healthcare system writ large was instead clouded by the dysfunction that hospitals are known for only too well”.

Other disappointed healthcare professionals posted screenshots on social media, showing error messages received instead of appointments.

“In attempting to prove I am not a robot repeatedly, I watched every date and time slip away,” [tweeted George Alba](#), a pulmonary and critical care physician at Massachusetts general hospital.

He added: “We got crushed by a boulder of operational failure.”

A spokesman said Mass General Brigham was following priorities set by the commonwealth of [Massachusetts](#) with guidance from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and that “the first group is deliberately inclusive of the role groups who are involved in the care of Covid patients”.

“While we have now scheduled as many appointments as our initial supply allows, we expect to receive a significant shipment of vaccine in the coming days,” he said.

Tufts medical center experienced similar issues with online signup, [the Boston Globe](#) reported.

As the US mounts a historic vaccination campaign, such hiccups could prove a harbinger of problems affecting Americans at large, Santiago warned.

“It’s more [about] lessons learned for when this really is gonna be distributed on a large scale for the rest of the population,” she said.

The troubles were yet another blow to frontline workers enduring a year in which [more than 317,000](#) people in the US have died from the coronavirus.

“I’m going to try to focus on being happy for everyone who managed to get a vaccine slot, and not on my personal inability to do the same,” [tweeted Yuval Raz](#), a doctor at Mass General. “I mean, I’m probably going to fail and throw a tantrum, but I’ll try.”

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