



The first boxes of the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine are loaded into a truck for shipment from the McKesson facility in Shepherdsville, Ky., Monday. TIMOTHY D. EASLEY/AP

As vax demand falls, states are left with huge stockpile

BY JENNIFER MCDERMOTT
Associated Press

As demand for COVID-19 vaccines collapses in many areas of the U.S., states are scrambling to use stockpiles of doses before they expire and have to be added to the millions that have already gone to waste.

From some of the least vaccinated states, like Indiana and North Dakota, to some of the most vaccinated states, like New Jersey and Vermont, public health departments are shuffling doses around in the hopes of finding providers that can use them.

State health departments told The Associated Press they have tracked millions of doses that went to waste, including ones that expired, were in a multi-dose vial that couldn't be used completely or had to be tossed for some other reason like temperature issues or broken vials.

Nearly 1.5 million doses in Michigan, 1.45 million in North Carolina, 1 million in Illinois and almost 725,000 doses in Washington couldn't be used.

The percentage of wasted doses in California is only about 1.8%, but in a state that has received 84 million doses and administered more than 71 million of them, that equates to roughly 1.4 million doses. Providers there are asked to keep doses until they expire, then properly dispose of them, the California Department of Public Health said.

The national rate of wasted doses is about 9.5% of the more than 687 million doses that have been delivered as of late February, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Thursday. That equates to about 65 million doses.

The problem is not unique to the U.S. More than a million doses of the Russian Sputnik vaccine expired this week in Guatemala, because nobody wanted to take the shot.

Vaccination program managers say that tossing out doses is inevitable in any inoculation campaign because of the difficulty in aligning supply and demand for a product with a limited shelf life.

But the coronavirus pandemic has killed nearly 6 million people and shattered economies across the globe, and every dose that goes to waste feels like a missed opportunity considering how successful the vaccines are in preventing death and serious disease.

It also comes only about a year after people desperate to get the vaccine attempted to jump in line to get ahead of those deemed higher priority. Hospital board members, their trustees and donors around the U.S. got early access or offers for vaccinations, raising complaints about favoritism and inequity at a time when the developing world had virtually no doses.

And many poorer nations still have low vaccine

rates, including 13 countries in Africa with less than 5% of their population fully vaccinated. They are plagued by unpredictable deliveries, weak health care systems, vaccine hesitancy and some supply issues, although health officials say inventory is markedly stronger than earlier in the pandemic.

In fact, supplies are so strong that the CDC now advises doctors that it's OK to discard doses if it means opening up the standard multi-dose vials to vaccinate a single person and the rest has to be tossed.

"Pivoting to what's happening now, you have much more production and distribution to low-income countries," said Dr. Joseph Bresee, who directs the COVID-19 Vaccine Implementation Program at the Task Force for Global Health in Decatur, Georgia. "The issue of some stockpiles in the U.S., Germany and Japan, that are not redistributed to sub-Saharan Africa, it's less of an acute problem now because vaccine production and distribution is in high-gear right now serving those low-income countries."

The Department of Health and Human Services also said that redistributing states' excess doses to other nations is not feasible because of the difficulty in transporting the shots, which must remain cold, in addition to not being cost effective because of the relatively small number concentrated at sites.

Of the more than 687 million doses sent to states, 550 million to 600 million have been administered, HHS said Monday. The vaccines authorized in the U.S., made by Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson, can last for up to about six months from the time of manufacture.

A senior HHS official familiar with vaccine distribution plans took issue with the word "wastage," saying it implies mismanagement when states are effectively overseeing their inventories. The CDC, however, uses the term "wastage" on its website and asks states to report their numbers.

The CDC said Thursday that the federal government, jurisdictions and vaccine providers have a strong partnership to get as many people vaccinated as possible while reducing vaccine wastage, and that the likelihood of leaving unused doses in a vial may increase as demand slows, even when providers continue to follow best practices to use every dose possible.

The fading demand comes as the pandemic itself wanes in the U.S. On Thursday, the CDC said about 90% of the U.S. population lives in countries where the risk of coronavirus is posing a low or medium threat — meaning residents don't need to wear masks in most indoor settings. That was up from 70% last week.

The average number of

Americans getting their first shot is down to about 70,000 a day, the lowest point since the U.S. vaccination campaign began in December 2020. About 76% of the U.S. population has received at least one shot and roughly 65% of all Americans are fully vaccinated.

With demand so low, states will undoubtedly be confronted with more waste in the months ahead, although they will benefit from any booster expansions.

Idaho, for example, has 230,000 doses on hand but is only averaging fewer than 2,000 doses administered a week.

Oregon's vaccination rate is slightly higher than the national average, but the health authority there said last week that they have "significant excess vaccine on hand" because of the recent drop in demand. The state is trying to use up as many of the 716,000 doses in its inventory as possible.

Rhode Island has the highest percentage of residents who are fully vaccinated in the nation, at slightly more than 80%, but the health department reported having 137,000 doses on hand last week. Health officials say they need them for a big push to increase the vaccination rate for booster doses.

Health officials in some states have developed "matchmaker" programs to connect vaccine providers with excess doses with providers seeking doses. Many said they're attempting to redistribute doses with expiration dates that are quickly approaching. New Jersey has a task force that has transferred more than 600,000 doses around the state since June. West Virginia has offered to transfer Pfizer adult doses to nearby states.

Immunization managers have been asking for single-dose vials, especially for pediatricians, but it may not work for manufacturers to package it that way yet, said Claire Hannan, executive director at the Association of Immunization Managers. She said wasting vaccine "just can't be an issue."

"We tell this to providers, but the most important thing is getting people vaccinated. And that's hard when the demand goes down. You don't have constant flow," she said. "But that's just a necessary evil I guess."

HHS said states are ordering prudently, paralleling the drop in demand. The minimum order for Pfizer used to be nearly 1,200 doses but now it's 100, and Moderna reduced the number of doses per vial, the agency said.

"Given what we've seen in terms of the number of people still unvaccinated, I do think finding any way to get the shot in arms, even at the expense of potential wastage, is still important," said Katie Greene, an assistant research director at the Duke-Margolis Center for Health Policy.

Ex-officer cleared in shooting during Breonna Taylor raid

BY DYLAN LOVAN
Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — A former Kentucky police officer was found not guilty Thursday on charges he endangered neighbors the night he fired into Breonna Taylor's apartment during a botched drug raid that resulted in Taylor's death.

The panel of eight men and four women delivered its verdict for Brett Hankison about three hours after it took the case following closing arguments from prosecution and defense attorneys.

None of the officers involved in the March 13, 2020, raid were charged with Taylor's death, and Hankison did not fire any of the bullets that killed the 26-year-old Black woman. His acquittal likely closes the door on the possibility of state criminal charges against any of the officers involved in the raid. A federal investigation into whether the officers violated his civil rights is underway.

Taylor's mother, Tamika Palmer, and a group of friends and family left quickly without commenting after the verdict.

Hankison did not appear outside the courtroom after the verdict was read. But his attorney Stewart Mathews said he and his client were "thrilled."

Asked what might have swayed the jury, Mathews replied, "I think it was absolutely the fact that he was doing his job as a police officer."

Assistant Kentucky Attorney General Barbara Maines Whaley said she respected the jury's verdict but had no further comment.

Prosecutors stressed in opening statements that the case wasn't about Taylor's death or the police decisions that led to the raid. Jurors were shown a single image of her body, barely discernible at the end of the hallway.

Taylor had been settling down for bed when officers arrived at her door. She was shot multiple times in her hallway and died at the scene.

Protesters filled the streets for months after Kentucky Attorney General David Cameron's office declined to seek charges against any of the officers in connection to Taylor's death. Taylor's name and those of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery — Black men who died in encounters with police and white pursuers — became rallying cries during racial justice protests seen across the nation in 2020.

Sadiqa Reynolds, president and CEO of the Louisville Urban League, said she was not surprised by the verdict. Black



A Jefferson County Sheriff (left) speaks with former Louisville Police officer Brett Hankison, before leaving the courtroom following his acquittal on three counts of wanton endangerment on Thursday in Louisville, Ky. TIMOTHY D. EASLEY/AP

residents of the city, she explained, had already been "experiencing a certain amount of frustration," because no officer had been charged for Taylor's death.

"I think there are a lot of people who are disappointed. It is very disheartening, but I have to tell you, it's just not surprising," she said. "It just doesn't feel like an optimistic day for policing, for Black people, for our entire community."

Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer said the jury's verdict added to the "frustration and anger of many over the inability to find more accountability for the tragic events of March 13, 2020."

"While the conduct considered in this case was not specific to Breonna Taylor's death, the fact remains that she should not have died that night, and I know that for many, justice has still not been achieved," he said.

Fischer cited some of the changes Louisville metro government has made since Taylor's death, such as banning so-called no-knock warrants and conducting a top-to-bottom review of the police department.

Hankison, 45, had been charged with three counts of wanton endangerment for firing through sliding-glass side doors and a window of Taylor's apartment during the raid. Multiple bullets passed through the wall of a neighboring apartment, and prosecutors said Hankison endangered the lives of a pregnant woman, her young child and her boyfriend who lived there.

Hankison's attorneys never contested the ballistics evidence, but said he fired 10 bullets because he thought his fellow officers were "being executed."

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