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TREASURE COAST NEWSPAPERS

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2 Treasure Coast districts see decline in state funding

Pandemic pinches some schools' 2021-22 budgets

Sommer Brugal

Treasure Coast Newspapers
USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

This time last year, as local school districts were planning their 2020-21 budgets, officials in some counties were

anticipating about a 10% reduction in state funding. But as the COVID-19 pandemic continued well into the start of the school year, many wondered whether it would affect their state allocations for 2021-22.

Turns out, the answer differs across the Treasure Coast.

Only one area school district is expecting more money from the state's \$22.8 billion public-school budget in

2021-22 than it received this year, records show. The 4.5% increase in overall education spending includes more than \$464 million lawmakers set aside for missing students.

St. Lucie County expects to get \$212 million for next school year, about a 2% increase from nearly \$208 million it received this year, records show.

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The St. Lucie County School District won't know its final allocation until after school begins in the fall, an official with the district said. That is why the district is projecting a decrease. PATRICK DOVE/TCPALM

Homebound patients in vaccine 'blind spot'



"Not only do I get the shot and all the good things that come with it, I don't have to put myself at risk to do so. So them bringing it here is literally a godsend," said Phillip Evola, who had his second COVID-19 vaccine shot and a B-12 shot given to him by Diane Murray, a physician assistant with Doctors House Calls, on April 29 at Evola's home in Port St. Lucie. Evola and his wife, Joann, use Doctors House Calls as their primary medical care providers. The Stuart-based company began giving the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine to homebound patients April 1.

MOLLY BARTELS/SPECIAL TO TCPALM

Some vulnerable, primarily older Florida residents say state leaders overlooked them as others received shots

Lindsey Leake Treasure Coast Newspapers | USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

Phillip Evola sat in the living room of his Port St. Lucie home, gray ponytail draped across the back of his wheelchair.

No fewer than six guitars were strewn about and though a signed Aerosmith album hung on one wall, it was the skulls atop the amplifiers that reflected the 71-year-old's status as a self-proclaimed Deadhead.

His own band — they call themselves The Elderly Brothers these days — has been on hiatus during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to Stuart-based mobile medical provider Doctors House Calls, he's one step closer to rocking out.

"I can finally get back to not only playing in the band, I miss people, I missed hugging," Evola said. "My world has consisted of this house and walking (my dog) Carmine, with the walker, two houses to the east and two houses to the west. And that's it."

Doctors House Calls, which vaccinated Phillip and his wife Joann at their home in April, is among the mobile

"I was incredibly angry. Here was a group of people who are primarily old; they have a higher risk factor innately. Why not put them, if not on top, at least up there with nursing homes?"

Phillip Evola

health care operations immunizing the untold number of homebound residents on the Treasure Coast.

As elated Phillip said he is that he and Joann are now fully vaccinated, he's stung it took the Florida Department of Health and Gov. Ron DeSantis so long to make sure homebound patients had vaccine access.

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Coyotes keep making presence known

Invaders attack dogs in parts of Port St. Lucie

Olivia McKelvey

Treasure Coast Newspapers
USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

PORT ST. LUCIE — Jason Kozusko was enjoying his morning coffee May 9 at his Southeast Elrose Street home when he heard his 7-year-old chihuahua miniature-pinscher mix, Kai, cry out in pain. Minutes after sitting on down on the couch, he saw his four-legged best friend in the jaws of a coyote.

Kozusko screamed and threw things at the coyote to get it to release Kai from its teeth. The dog sustained bites all over his body and punctures to his small intestines and kidney, Kozusko said. Kai was rushed into emergency surgery, but died during the operation.

"Kai was everyone's best friend," Kozusko told TCPalm. "He had so much energy, and although he was a little dog, he always thought he was a Great Dane."

But coyotes in a Port St. Lucie neighborhood?

It's not that unusual, Kozusko said. He just was shocked one got close enough to kill his dog.

Kai was the most recent report of a deadly animal encounter with a coyote here, but many residents say they have witnessed a spike in sightings.

"I've been trapping feral hogs, iguanas, coyotes, bobcats and other animals

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A member of Wild Florida Rescue, the Brevard County nonprofit group that organized a four-day search for a coyote with its head trapped in a plastic jar in Sebastian, said it was "eating like a champ" at Busch Wildlife Sanctuary in Jupiter as of Feb. 19.

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Homebound

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“I was incredibly angry. Here was a group of people who are primarily old; they have a higher risk factor innately,” Evola said. “Why not put them, if not on top, at least up there with nursing homes?”

“Yet we waited weeks and weeks and weeks. Mini-Trump up there in Tallahassee completely forgot about us.”

Homebound Floridians not initially prioritized in ‘Seniors First’ campaign

Just before Christmas, DeSantis signed an executive order prioritizing three groups for vaccination:

- Front-line health care workers
- Staff and residents of longterm care facilities
- People 65 and older.

The Evolas fell into the latter category on paper. In practice, as homebound residents, they weren’t initially targeted in the governor’s highly touted “Seniors First” campaign.

“We remain laser-focused on protecting those most vulnerable to COVID-19,” DeSantis said in a Jan. 22 video briefing, “and ensuring that every senior who wants a vaccine can get a vaccine.”

In the first weeks of 2021, even the most able-bodied seniors battled for appointments through Cleveland Clinic Florida and health department pop-up clinics. Vaccine supply varied week to week and waitlists quickly filled.

Doses were distributed among Treasure Coast retail pharmacies in February, including CVS and Walmart. In March, the state opened a longterm, walk-in clinic in Fort Pierce. By the time spring officially arrived, snagging an appointment was no longer cutthroat.

But it didn’t matter. Medical conditions prevented the Evolas from leaving their home.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Evola said. “The whole handling of this in the state of Florida has been backward, has been ridiculously aimed in the wrong direction — every step of the way.”

‘The state ... has not given me one vial’

The Florida Division of Emergency Management launched a pilot homebound vaccination program in early February, beginning with Holocaust survivors in four counties, including Martin. It then expanded to World War II and Korean War veterans.

It wasn’t until March 12 that the state invited the general population of homebound Floridians 65 and older to request a vaccine at homeboundvaccine@em.myflorida.com.

By that time, school employees, firefighters and law enforcement officers 50 and older had been prioritized for vaccination. All Floridians 40 and older became eligible by March’s end, when the state launched a dedicated phone line, 866-779-6121, and patient questionnaire for homebound residents.



Kris Labson, left, an Registered Nurse with Mobile Medical Associates, vaccinates Roy Eitneier at his home on May 6 in Martin County. Eitneier, who is currently homebound and utilizing a motorized wheelchair, said he was “jumping for joy” about getting the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine. “It means a lot to me,” said Roy’s wife, Betty Eitneier, about being vaccinated at home. Now, she said the couple will be able to “go to park, sit by the water, have a sandwich, get out in the fresh air.” LEAH VOSS/TCPALM

The Evolas, who were existing Doctors House Calls patients, received their first dose of the Moderna shot April 1, just four days before everyone 16 and older became eligible.

The state’s ineffective distribution strategy is to blame, according to Doctors House Calls office manager Becky Daniels.

She requested doses for her more than 800 patients in January through state immunization portal Florida SHOTS.

“To this very second, Florida SHOTS — the state level — has not given me one vial,” Daniels said April 29. “Not one.”

The health department’s Martin County office supplied Doctors House Calls with 100 doses March 31, but only after Daniels had made a televised plea, she said. DOH-Martin since has given her 200 additional doses as she waits on the state.

“It took a while. It took a very long time just to get where we needed to get,” Daniels said. “And we’re one company, one practice, in the state.”

Vaccinating a population in state’s ‘blind spot’

Over 24,000 homebound residents had been vaccinated through the state’s program through May 14, according to the DEM. That doesn’t include people such as the Evolas, who sought private mobile care.

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Homebound

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It's difficult to calculate how many more homebound Floridians may be in need of vaccination because the population is fluid and loosely defined. Medicare utilization data provides a ballpark, according to Kyle Simon, spokesperson for the Home Care Association of Florida.

Over 310,000 Florida residents utilized the Medicare home health services benefit in 2019, per the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services — second only to California. This excludes older patients not covered by Medicare, as well as younger homebound Floridians.

Even if all homebound patients the state has vaccinated to date were 65 or older, these data suggest less than 8% of homebound seniors have been inoculated.

"There's a lot of ground that they still have to make up," Simon said.

"Homebound patients have been in a

blind spot." While the U.S. Census Bureau doesn't track homebound individuals, it monitors the number of people with certain disabilities.

More than 96,000 Treasure Coast residents live with a disability — about 15% of the population.

Over 56,000 have ambulatory difficulties, over 43,000 have independent living difficulties and over 20,000 have self-care difficulties.

None of these disabilities necessarily means a person is homebound, but the data sheds light on the number of locals who may have difficulty booking and attending vaccine appointments on their own.

Home not a safe haven from coronavirus exposure

There's a misconception that homebound people are at low risk of contracting COVID-19, said Daniels.

"But the reality is they've got home health coming into their house, they've got the lab coming into their house, they've got radiology coming," she said.

"They're the ones that are going to be hit hardest."

Doctors House Calls also offers the vaccine to family caregivers at a homebound patient's residence who may inadvertently expose them to the virus. So does Mobile Medical Associates, based in Palm City.

Betty Eitneier cares for her husband Roy, who uses a motorized wheelchair. Both received the Moderna vaccine from the company in early May at their Palm City home.

"They definitely have not addressed the homebound people. They have not," Eitneier said. "My biggest gripe is homebound people are not capable of doing what everybody else can do."

"I can go get the shot, but taking [Roy] to go get it is not feasible."

Mobile Medical Associates so far has vaccinated roughly 10,000 people, said registered nurse Kris Labson. This includes clinic vaccinations in addition to homebound patients.

The provider had a somewhat easier time securing doses than Doctors House Calls, having received its first batch from DOH-Martin in January. DOH-St.

Lucie supplied as many as 1,000 doses in another, according to president and nurse practitioner Laurie Grissman.

Grissman last month said she was crossing her fingers she could get a steady supply from the state. Until then, "we're still at the mercy of the (local) health department(s)," she said.

Though progress is being made, Daniels stressed there remains a disconnect preventing mobile providers from getting enough doses to serve their clientele.

As local mass vaccination clinics prepare to cease or slow operations and children as young as 12 begin inoculation, Phillip Evola reminds there are residents like him and Joann on the Treasure Coast and in Florida who are still waiting their turn at home.

"Not only do I get the shot and all the good things that come with it, I don't have to put myself at risk to do so," he said. "Them bringing it here is literally a godsend."

Lindsey Leake is TCPalm's health, welfare and social justice reporter. Call her at 772-529-5378 or email her at lindsey.leake@tcpalm.com.

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