

# VACCINE TOURISM HAS SPREAD AROUND THE U.S.



Foreigners and nationals have been taking advantage of the relaxation of requirements in the United States to encourage COVID-19 vaccination.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, thousands of Americans who had not been able to secure an appointment for vaccination in crowded cities or where they are not eligible yet travel to neighboring states to receive the vaccine. Vaccine tourism is now a widespread phenomenon.

Several US citizens have shared how they made appointments to get vaccinated in other states. **Ohio, one of the few states that publish population statistics, reports that 100,000 of the 3 million vaccinated are not residents.**

By the end of March, 3% of the vaccines administered in the Virgin Islands went to Americans who traveled there for the holidays. Since March 1, the Islands began to administer doses to anyone over 16, something that Americans from states with different requirements took advantage of. Local health authorities and ethicists do not see a big problem with vaccine tourism in the US Virgin Islands, given the extensive supply of injections and high levels of reluctance to vaccinate among local residents. In addition, the trend could slow as more entities in the United States relax their requirements. Still, wealthy Americans traveling to the Caribbean to get their COVID-19 vaccines are an example of the many ways that access to vaccines around the world is determined by race, circumstances and privilege.

## Fewer Requirements

The reason why many organizations have extended vaccination campaigns to those without residency documents is to encourage undocumented immigrants who may be reluctant to receive the vaccine or can't access it if they are asked for identification.

In California, special vaccination centers have even been opened for farmworkers, many of them undocumented.

"Chasing down people who may or may not be eligible after they appear to be eligible is probably not where we want to put our time and energy. We just want to get vaccines in arms," said Kris Widlak, Director of Communications for Colorado's Eagle County.

## International Vaccine Tourism

US media such as NBC, NPR and State have reported a flow of wealthy visitors, especially Mexicans and Canadians with dual citizenship, traveling to the United States, as well as the spread of advice on social media and messaging apps of citizens who organize to go get vaccinated. At this time, it is not possible to know how many people have used this method.

Travel blog Travel Off Path reported that states such as Texas, Arizona and Louisiana no longer require proof of residency to be vaccinated, although it warns that several centers could ask for

some form of identification when making an appointment.

The US government has not issued a statement on vaccine tourism, although guidelines have been changing rapidly. For example, the government of Florida now requires proof of residency after reports of wealthy Canadians, Brazilians and Venezuelans traveled to the state to get vaccinated.

Gem Tours & Travels, a travel agency in India, even openly offers travel packages from Mumbai to New York to get vaccinated for \$2,000. In countries where vaccine tourism started to boom, such as the United Arab Emirates, vaccination of tourists was banned shortly after.

### **Controversial Form of Tourism**

While medical tourism is common, vaccine tourism has raised questions about its ethical implications as vaccine appointments are rare commodities. **On the one hand, some experts believe it is better to vaccinate as many people as possible, no matter where they are from.**

“The most important thing is: do not waste vaccines. I much prefer it going into somebody’s arm than a trash can,” said Arthur Caplan, professor of bioethics at the NYU School of Medicine.

On the other hand, some say that this is another example of how economic inequality can also be seen throughout the pandemic.

“Vaccine tourists are using their power to create an unfair opportunity for themselves [...] when someone travels for the vaccine, they’re using resources, both doses and all the delivery mechanisms that have been allocated to a different community,” said Kyle Ferguson, a postdoctoral fellow in the division of medical ethics at the New York University Grossman School of Medicine.

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