

Vaccinations back on track after midweek snag left seniors in the cold

Jessie Paquette dressed extra warmly on Friday morning.

Donning two pairs of jeans, a toque, and wrapping a heavy scarf around her neck, the 90-year-old Aurora resident wasn't taking any chances on her way to Newmarket's Ray Twinney Complex to receive her first dose of the Pfizer vaccine.

She saw the pictures on her iPad the previous day, images of seniors standing in line outside the Complex in the blistering cold waiting for their turn. But, in her mind, the pros outweighed the cons and she was determined to get in line.

She was not alone. Nor was she alone in having questions, questions which staff from Southlake Regional Health Centre and the Town of Newmarket worked to rectify.

In a statement issued on Thursday, Southlake said it "apologized" for the long line and said earlier in the day they experienced "some system and process issues" that resulted in the delays.

Following Southlake's statement, Newmarket Mayor John Taylor issued an apology of his own to those who were impacted by the snag.

"We should never allow our seniors to wait like that in the cold with nowhere to sit," he said in a statement posted to social media. "To be honest, I was heartbroken to see it. We sent over 12 staff and in about a half hour we had a numbering system in place, everyone inside and in chairs. Southlake CEO Arden Krystal has explained to me that the COVAX booking system went down/slowed down and created the backlog, amongst other issues. Having said that, a call for assistance should have been issued immediately and people should have been given information and moved inside. In fact, they should and will be inside from now on. I assure you there will be lessons learned."

These lessons learned were shared Friday with The Auroran by Dr. Gayle Seddon, Executive Lead on Vaccinations at Southlake.

"The team last night spent a lot of time looking at exactly what happened yesterday," she said. "We partnered with the Town of Newmarket and that is helping us ensure that people arrive ten minutes before their scheduled time. Sometimes people arrive an hour or so, maybe more, and believe that they should get into the clinic and that is really not what should happen with a mass vaccination clinic. Our partners with the Town of Newmarket meet people in their cars, confirm the time of their appointment, and then they also check to make sure they're coming into the Centre about 10 minutes before their appointment. Making sure that people get into the vaccination centre at their scheduled time is one of our big learnings from yesterday."

"We are very sorry for the experiences people had yesterday. What we want them to know is all of the feedback people gave us, we debriefed through all of that last evening and put plans in place to address the concerns people had. They gave us feedback, we listened, we put it into our system, into our plans last night and we addressed it."

Arriving just a few hours later, Ms. Paquette had a very different experience than her friends who were in line the day before.

"I was very afraid there were going to be big lineups," says Ms. Paquette, who lives in the community with her daughter and son-in-law. "But we drove in, went inside, sat down and we were called. I got my shot and then we had to wait 15 minutes before we left and could come home. I was very impressed."

Since the start of the pandemic, Ms. Paquette has done what she could to help the cause. An avid knitter, she crafted mask extenders for frontline workers, including those at Southlake, which allowed face masks to be fixed behind the head rather than looped around the ears, a method that is far removed from comfortable after wearing the necessary coverings for hours at a time.

She didn't hesitate to get the Polio vaccine when it was first developed, and she's not about to embrace vaccine hesitancy any time soon.

?I think it is important that people realize that we have a pandemic and in order to get through it and get through it successfully we have to look back on what happened when they had the Polio vaccine and everybody went and got it,? she says. ?I think people realize that they have to have to get the shot. If you haven't heard people talking about adverse reactions to it, why wouldn't you go out? All of my friends have gone and got it; it is there, it is being offered as a public service and they have organized it extremely well for people.

?I am not sure if I'm looking forward to the second shot, but I am going to get it! My son-in-law is American and his wife, my daughter, is a Canadian and they have a son living in Texas who had their first baby and they can't even get down to see them. You have to look at the circumstances. We must do things in order to curtail it coming back and having another wave. I am looking forward to being able to get out ? I am tired of being in the house!?

As of Tuesday, March 9, Aurora has seen a total of 980 cases of COVID-19, 32 of which remain active. There have been 908 recoveries and 40 fatalities attributed to the virus. Of the active cases, 29 are attributed to close contact or local transmission and 3 to workplace cluster.

For more information on York Region's vaccination efforts, and to book your appointment when the time comes for your age group or personal circumstance, visit York.ca/covid19.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter