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TOP STORY

Want to help?

Blood donation shortage triggers emergency appeal

By Melissa Russell Contributing Writer

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Destiny Rich, a collection technician for the American Red Cross, prepares to remove a needle from Tina Hamolsky's arm in Jaffrey in the summer of 2022. The Red Cross is facing its worst blood donation shortage in a decade, triggering an emergency appeal from the nonprofit.

File photo by Hannah Schroeder / Sentinel Staff

Contact the Red Cross to find a blood drive in your area via the Red Cross blood donor app, visit www.redcrossblood.org or call 1-800-REDCROSS to find a blood drive near you. You can also contact <https://donateblood.d-h.org/donor/schedules/centers> or Dartmouth Health Blood Services in Lebanon at 866-403-6667.

On a recent snowy afternoon, Lionel “Rip” Rocheleau was working the snack table at a blood donation drive at St. John Neumann Catholic Church in Merrimack. It was a pretty good turnout despite the weather, not really a surprise for Rocheleau, who knows New Hampshire residents to be generous blood donors.

“I know New Hampshire is a state where people give more blood than they use,” the 75-year-old Merrimack resident said.

Despite the Granite State’s generosity, the American Red Cross is facing its worst blood donation shortage in a decade, triggering an emergency appeal from the national nonprofit.

‘We need to collect 165 pints every day in New Hampshire to meet patient demand,’ said Jennifer Costa, communications director for the Red Cross’ Northern New England Region.

New Hampshire tends to be one of the stronger areas in the country when it comes to donating blood, Costa said. But the good news is limited. While the Red Cross met its regional goal during the holidays, blood donations dropped off significantly heading into the new year.

“We did OK, we met our goal, but what will that look like next month?” Costa said.

Every two seconds, someone in this country needs blood, according to the Red Cross. Cancer patients, surgical patients, those with chronic illnesses, accident victims; all rely on donations of red blood cells, platelets or plasma to survive. And while about 62 percent of the national population is eligible to donate, only 3 percent does, according to Costa.

The current shortage means the Red Cross has had to limit distribution of some of the most transfused blood types to hospitals around the country. As a result, elective surgeries could be postponed if a necessary blood product is not available. The worst-case scenario is that a physician would have to forego performing a more serious procedure because the specific blood type is not available, Costa said.

The American Red Cross is the largest supplier of blood in the country, providing about 40 percent of the nation’s blood. The organization is currently experiencing critically low levels of O positive, O negative (the universal blood donor type because it does not trigger an immune response), B negative and platelets, which are the blood’s clotting mechanism, often needed by trauma and cancer patients. While whole blood has a shelf life of 42 days, platelets can only be stored for five days, Costa said.

Because the Red Cross is a national organization, it can move blood from one region of the country to another, in cases of natural disasters or other urgent scenarios. Blood donated in New Hampshire won’t go to waste if it is not needed here during its brief storage life, she said.

“We’re not going to let it die on the shelf if there is not an immediate need here. We will move it to where it needs to go to help the most number of people,” she said.

While there have been shortages in the past, the current situation is particularly acute because there are fewer people nationwide donating blood today than in the past 20 years, Costa said. The number of people donating to the Red Cross fell by more than 40 percent, from 3.7 million in 2003 to 2.1 million in 2022. Last month, between Christmas and New Year’s Day, the Red Cross experienced a 7,000-pint shortfall in blood donations.

So, what has caused the drop-off? One answer is the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on how people live, work and learn. Remote work and learning have led to a drop of 300,000 blood donors since 2019, Costa said.

“Our ability to meet people where they are at, hosting blood drives at their employer, making the donation opportunity convenient, has become harder for us,” she said.

At the height of the pandemic, blood drives sponsored by high schools, colleges and universities, where young people are often first introduced to the concept of blood donation, were put on hold as schools moved to virtual learning.

“We saw a staggering drop in donations from those who normally give at those drives, so in 2021 we saw 260,000 donors age 18 to 24 give to the Red Cross, less than half of what we saw two years earlier,” she said. “We missed a whole class of young people going

through school.”

Dr. Zbigniew Szczepiorkowski, a transfusion medicine specialist and director of donor services for Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon, said cancer patients, pregnant women, patients with significant blood loss stemming from complex surgeries and blood-related diseases such as sickle cell disease, are most at risk due to blood shortages.

Attracting blood donors requires innovation, he said, and the shortfall has changed the way patients receive blood.

In some areas, such as orthopedic surgeries, Szczepiorkowski said doctors use much less blood than they once did. But when patients experience traumatic injuries, like in vehicle accidents or while skiing, hospitals need to have blood on hand.

While changes to some surgical procedures and storage technology have helped conserve the blood supply, and the lifting of restrictions based on sexual orientation and certain geographical areas has made donation more inclusive, there is still no replacement for human blood. Instead, finding new donors and convincing them to do what they can to save the lives of people they don't know is critical.

Red Cross appeals to the media for help attracting donors as something of a last resort, Costa said. Before that, the organization leverages its pool of existing donors, alerting them to shortages and encouraging them to donate, as long as it has been at least 56 days since their last donation.

They offer incentives through corporate partnerships to make donation more appealing. For instance, anyone donating in January, which is National Blood Donation Month, will be entered to win a trip for two to the Super Bowl in Las Vegas, Costa said.

“I am not a doctor, not a firefighter, not a hero in any way, but I know that by rolling up my sleeve I could save someone else's life,” she said.

Szczepiorkowski added that even semiannual donations can be critical.

“Convincing people to be donors twice a year would make a huge difference in the lives of many people,” Szczepiorkowski said. “As a society, we have work to do. We are all getting older and if we don’t figure out how to engage the youngest of us, we will all suffer because of it.”

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