

Georgia teachers going out of state to get vaccinated



Alison Cundiff's heartbeat quickened as she handed the man her driver's license.

The Gwinnett County middle school teacher had driven nearly three hours for her appointment at this Tennessee COVID-19 vaccination site, and she worried that he would see the word "Georgia" on her license and send her home without a shot.

Moments later, though, that tension gave way to relief.

"They did not care at all," Cundiff said.

She is among an untold number of Georgia teachers who said they were frustrated by the wait for their turn here and have crossed state lines in search of a vaccine. In Cundiff's case, that was at a Tennessee Department of Health vaccination site at a church in Cleveland, a town north of Chattanooga.

The Georgians making these trips see vaccination as essential to safety in their schools. Health leaders in the destination states say the traveling teachers are taking vaccines away from their residents, but they haven't prohibited the activity.

Georgia is not reciprocating. Under [recently published state rules](#), vaccine providers in the state could temporarily lose access to doses if they knowingly vaccinate someone who neither works nor lives here.

Social media groups have filled with chatter about these trips to Alabama, Tennessee and other [states now vaccinating](#) teachers.

Kathy Kelly-George, a private school teacher in Atlanta, runs a Facebook group for teachers with more than 4,000 members and said at least 10 have posted about their vaccine voyages.

On Friday, she decided to book her own appointment. It took 10 minutes to secure an appointment at a pharmacy in Lanett, Alabama, she said. Monday afternoon she texted photos of herself after getting her

shot, a process that took about half an hour.

Teachers in Georgia [will be eligible for vaccines on March 8](#), behind most states, many of which started vaccinating teachers in January. Here seniors, their caretakers and emergency personnel [were put ahead of teachers](#). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has teachers in the second wave of vaccinations, behind only medical workers and long-term care residents, but has said teacher vaccinations are not necessary for schools to reopen for face-to-face learning [if other precautions](#) are followed.

Explore [Why Georgia lags in vaccinating teachers](#)

Alabama and Tennessee aren't inviting Georgia teachers for shots, but they are also not turning them away.

Tennessee encourages people to get vaccinated in the county where they live or work since doses are distributed based on the size of the local population, health department spokesman Bill Christian said in an email. But no proof of residency is required, he said.

Alabama's assistant state health officer, Dr. Karen Landers, said Monday that her state would prefer that people get vaccinated in their own state but that Alabama has no restriction against giving shots to people from elsewhere, to whom 1.7% of the state's doses have gone so far.

"We do understand that some people have come over to Alabama," Landers said. "We're monitoring it very closely." She added that her state hoped Georgia would give the vaccine to its own teachers soon.

Asked about these traveling teachers [at a Feb. 18 news conference](#), Georgia public health commissioner Dr. Kathleen Toomey urged Georgia educators to stay home and wait, saying traveling for vaccine undermines other states' ability to plan their rollouts. Toomey explained the decision to put older residents ahead of teachers, saying the state wanted to minimize deaths and prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed since the COVID-19 toll grows with the age of the population.

Teachers such as Laura Price Pitts were unwilling to wait.



Credit: CONTRIBUTED

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Decatur kindergarten teacher Laura Price Pitts got her first COVID-19 shot at a pharmacy in Tuskegee, Alabama on Friday. CONTRIBUTED

The kindergarten teacher in Decatur got her first shot at a pharmacy in Tuskegee, Alabama on Friday, about a two hours' drive. Pitts hasn't canceled her appointment for the second dose because she expects a lag time for teachers here when they become eligible next week.

"I have no faith that anything magical is going to happen on March the 8th," Pitts said.

Mary Souther teaches math at Decatur High School. Students are still online there, but not the track and cross country students she coaches. She thinks the safety protocols are good but worries about the exposure. She got her first shot on Sunday in Opelika, Alabama, at least a 3-hour round trip that she'll have to repeat for her second dose in several weeks.

"By the time I'm getting my second shot, I certainly hope most teachers in Decatur are getting their first one," she said.

Emily Robinson, a DeKalb County high school teacher, is currently holding class online but grew "desperate and panicky" knowing that some of her students would start coming in-person on March 15. She drove more than three hours through rain and fog — and around a fiery pileup on I-75 — to a "super rural" county north of Chattanooga on Feb. 11 to get her first shot.

Robinson said the county vaccination workers inspected her school identification but didn't ask for her driver's license. She said she felt it was appropriate to go out of state: "We paid for the vaccine with taxes so we can go anywhere, that's my understanding."

Some have been critical, though. Lisa Morgan, a fellow DeKalb teacher, said one of their colleagues who got vaccinated in Alabama stopped talking about it.

"She felt like she was being attacked. People were saying 'you jumped ahead of those other people,'" said Morgan, president of the Georgia Association of Educators.

Unlike Robinson, Cundiff, of Gwinnett County, did not need to produce her teaching credentials. She praised the Tennessee drive-through site where she got jabbed, describing it as an efficient, "reassuring" operation.

"I feel sad that I'm not really able to depend on my own state," said Cundiff, who suffers from immunodeficiency, with frequent bouts of shingles. "But my strongest feeling is my gratitude for the health department workers in Tennessee."

