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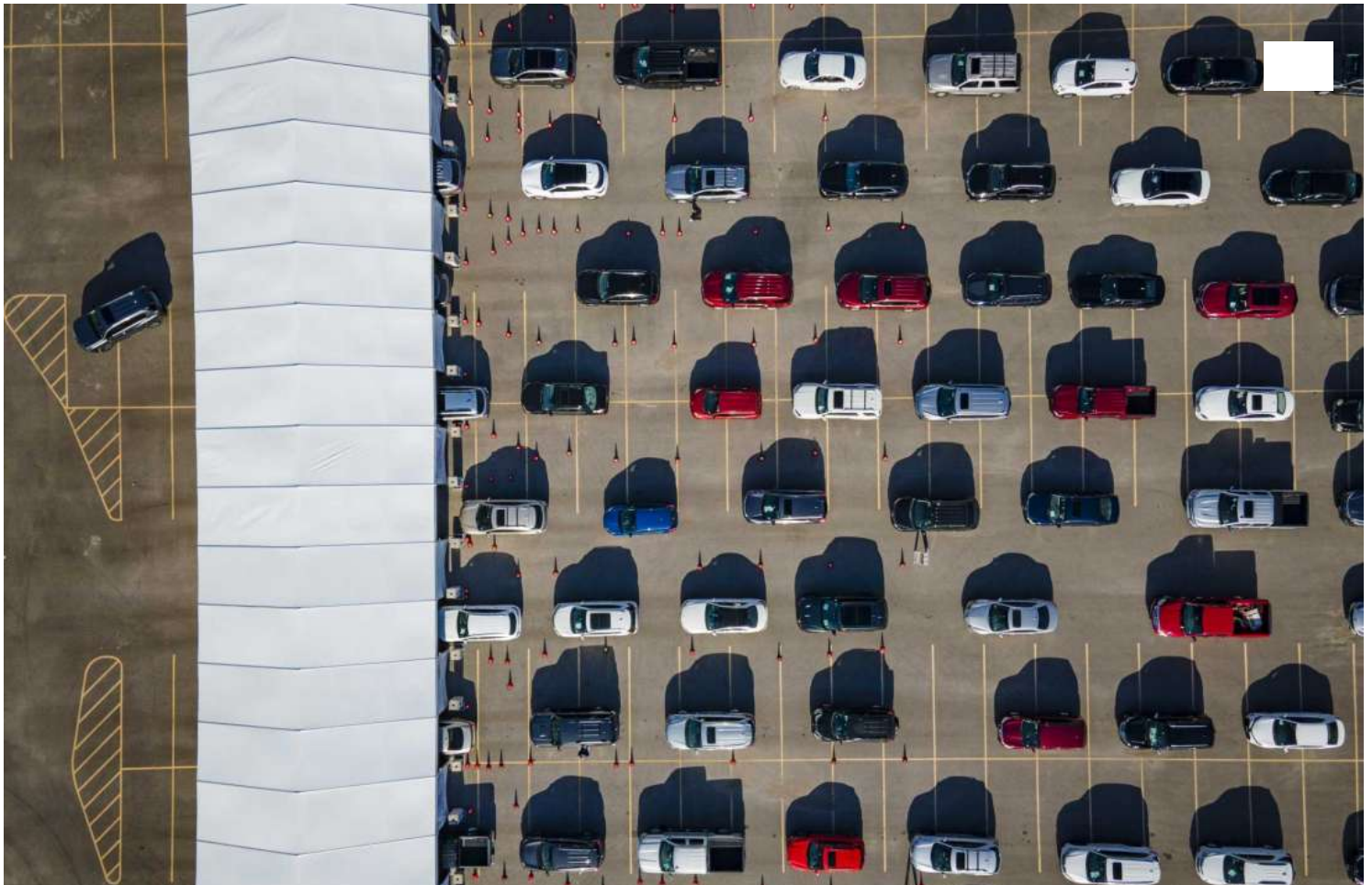
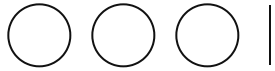
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INVESTIGATIONS

'Nobody is getting enough': Why Texas ranks near the bottom for COVID-19 vaccines per capita

Jordan Rubio, Alejandro Serrano

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People wait in their cars for a vaccination against COVID-19 at a drive-thru vaccination site set up by the city and United Memorial Medical Center, Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021, at Delmar Stadium in Houston. The vaccinations, the Moderna vaccine, are available by appointment only.

Mark Mulligan, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

As Texans scramble for appointments for the COVID-19 vaccine, federal data helps explain why: Relative to its population, the Lone Star State ranks near the bottom in the country in number of doses received.

Texas has received the second-highest number of doses in the country. Per capita, however, Texas comes in closer to the bottom at 49th out of all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico, according to an analysis of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data. Federal officials say there is a good reason for that: Vaccine distribution is based on the adult population of each state. And roughly a quarter of Texans are under the age of 18. Still, even when adjusted for adults only, Texas ranks 48th.

As Texas politicians from Congress down to local county judges push for more doses, the supply remains scarce, even for people older than age 65 and those with serious medical conditions.

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“Nobody is getting enough. That is plain and simple,” said Brazoria County Judge Matt Sebesta, estimating that more than half of the roughly 130 providers that signed up to distribute vaccines in the county have yet to receive any doses. “We are kind of where we were last April with personal protective equipment and testing equipment: not enough to go around.”

State health officials insisted they are ordering as many doses as they can from the federal government and distributing them as quickly as they can.

“The supply of vaccines is limited by both the manufacturers’ ability to produce it and the amount allotted to Texas by the federal government,” said Lara Anton, a spokeswoman for the Texas Department of State Health Services. “The federal government determines how much vaccine will be sent to providers in the state on a weekly basis.”

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services spokesman Bill Hall said the vaccines are distributed based on an algorithm that takes into account the adult population in each state and U.S. territory. “We are committed to fair and equitable allocation of vaccines and therapeutics,” Hall said.

Texas has received more than 3.5 million doses of the vaccine, though the rollout so far has been anything but smooth. County registration lines have crashed under demand.

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The issue has come to a head for some elected officials in Texas. U.S. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, a Houston Democrat who recently introduced a bill to direct federal

agencies to help with distribution and tracking, said the state's per capita vaccine allocation appeared to be "just inadequacy."

But a federal plan – utilizing the Federal Emergency Management Agency, military and National Guard – could bolster distribution and ensure no states are left behind, she said.

"We had no plan for the distribution. It is evident in the uneven distribution of vaccines," she said. "You have to take this over federally."

U.S. Rep. Al Green, D-Houston, blamed former President Donald Trump for missing the mark on his pledge to vaccinate 20 million people by the end of 2020.

"We're shortchanged on a per capita basis because the (former) president did not meet his goal. ... And coming up with some 17 million short has caused Texas to be shortchanged," Green told the Chronicle. "That concerns me greatly."

Green said he was encouraged by the new White House administration's plan to administer 100 million vaccine doses in its first 100 days. President Joe Biden announced Tuesday that the federal government would purchase 200 million more doses, split evenly between the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. The measures also would increase distribution of vaccine doses to states by next week, going to a minimum of 10 million doses weekly for states.

"Help is on the way," Green said. "I believe that the Biden administration is going to crank up production, better organize distribution, facilitate the administering of the vaccine to the extent that we will be able to get 100 million in 100 days with shots in arms."

Mary Anne Neuse, an 83-year-old retired network administrator who has asthma and diabetes, has been checking the website for the H-E-B in Kerrville every day for more

than a month, hoping to register for the vaccine. Every day, she said, the website says there aren't any doses available.

"I would think that with age and asthma and diabetes I'd be up high on the list for a shot," she said.

Vivian Ho, a health economist at Rice University's Baker Institute of Public Policy, said the impact of the relatively low per capita vaccinations in Texas is straightforward. "Fewer people get vaccinated, which means you are going to have more new cases," Ho said. "There is the health consequence, and there's the economic consequence."

As far as what would help, Ho said government officials can direct vaccines to states suffering the worst outbreaks.

"Again, that would put Texas at the front of the line, not at the end of the line," Ho said. "We know Texas is one of the worst right now."

Nationally, more than 432,000 people have died from COVID-19, including more than 35,000 Texans.

Texas is still struggling with high hospitalizations with 14 of the state's 22 trauma service areas continuing to see COVID-19 hospitalizations make up more than 15 percent of total capacity, the threshold that signifies "high hospitalizations," according to DSHS data.

Texas ranks sixth in the country for COVID-19 hospitalizations per 100,000 people, according to data from the nonprofit COVID Tracking Project. The per capita rolling averages for newly reported cases and deaths place Texas eighth and 12th, respectively.

Jenny Deam contributed to this report

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Before coming to Houston, Alejandro covered cops and courts in San Francisco. The Long Island native and Northeastern grad also helped with coverage of the wildfires and coronavirus.

In his free time, he likes to play guitar, read and hike.

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