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Alabama Official On Vaccine Rollout: 'How Can This Disparity Exist In This Country?'

Updated March 11, 2021 · 5:07 PM ET

Heard on All Things Considered



ARI SHAPIRO

FARAH ELTOHAMY

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Sheila Tyson, a Jefferson County commissioner in Birmingham, Ala., is fighting to get more doses of COVID-19 vaccines into communities of color in her state.

Andi Rice/Bloomberg via Getty Images

In Birmingham, Ala., Alabama Regional Medical Services — a health clinic that primarily serves a lower-income, Black neighborhood — has not administered a single dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. That is scheduled to begin Saturday.

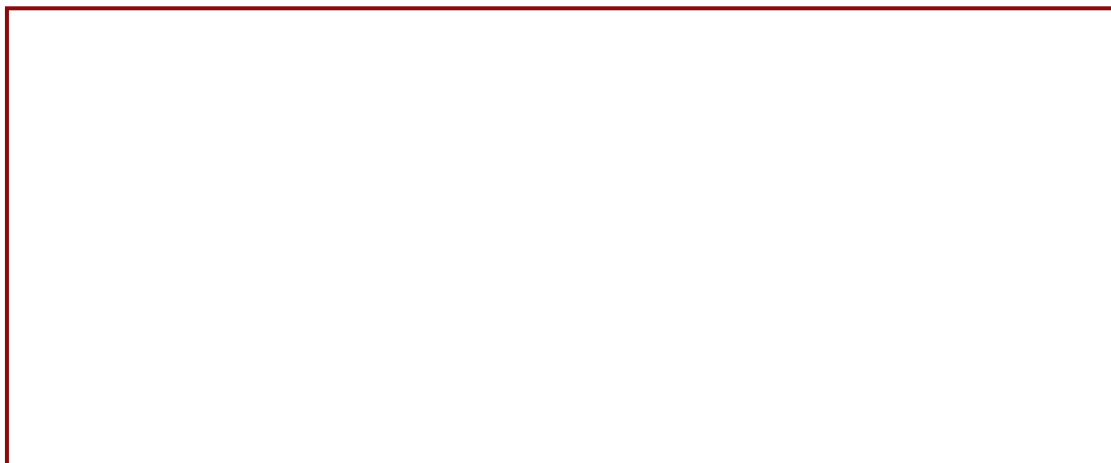
Meanwhile, the first doses in the state went to nearby Mountain Brook, an affluent white suburb of Birmingham, says Sheila Tyson, a commissioner for Jefferson County, where Birmingham is located.

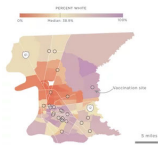
What's happening in Alabama's vaccine rollout is playing out across the country and is another way racial disparities have surfaced during a pandemic that has been killing people of color at disproportionately high rates.

"Black people are not still getting the same access," Tyson says in an interview on *All Things Considered*.

ARMS says it received its first vaccines from the Jefferson County Health Department on Feb. 19. And a statement from the department notes that the clinic received its first shipment of vaccine from the state allocation on March 8 and is to receive "a regular state allocation every three weeks."

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THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

Across The South, COVID-19 Vaccine Sites Missing From Black And Hispanic Neighborhoods

According to the most recent data provided by the state's health department, in cases where race was reported — white people have received 54.6% of vaccinations, compared to 14.6% for Black people.

Tyson says state officials have told her that they are not distributing vaccines to majority-Black neighborhoods because they expect people there may be hesitant to take them.

"They had stuck in their head that Black and brown communities will actually turn the vaccine down without even doing a survey, without even having a plan, without having a person representing those communities at the table with the planning session," she says.

However, the county health department says in response to Tyson's remarks that it "is unaware of any efforts to not distribute vaccine to majority-Black neighborhoods due to perceived vaccine hesitancy concerns."

"We have worked tirelessly to ensure equitable access and distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine throughout Jefferson County," the statement says.

Tyson says many people in her community are telling her that they're eager to get the vaccine.

"I am finding out thousands and thousands of people within the state of Alabama want the vaccine. We have over 125,000 people in Jefferson County on the waiting list," she says. "We want it now."

And the lack of vaccine isn't the only obstacle, Tyson says. She notes that her office has received hundreds of calls from people who are struggling to make appointments because they don't have access to the Internet or computers, and she is terrified about what will happen when the state's mask mandate ends in April.

"The pandemic has pulled the Band-Aid off of the racist cancer wounds that have covered this country for centuries. No one wants to address it. Everyone keeps dodging the questions," she says. "We have more access than anyone else. So how can this disparity exist in this country?"

Farah Eltohamy is NPR's Digital News intern.

Jason Fuller and Courtney Dorning produced and edited the audio interview.

Correction

March 11, 2021

A previous version of this story incorrectly stated that Alabama Regional Medical Services, a clinic in Birmingham, Ala., had not yet received any doses of the coronavirus vaccine. In fact, ARMS says it received its first vaccines from the Jefferson County Health Department on Feb. 19 and its first shipment of vaccine from the state allocation on March 8.

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