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The Illinois National Guard's latest mission: Help vaccinate Cook County from COVID-19

By STACY ST. CLAIR
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National Guard Specialist Sean Sumugat gives a COVID-19 vaccination to pharmacist specialist Jay Trivedi at Cook County Health's North Riverside Health Center as the National Guard begins its latest mission to help with vaccinations across the state on Jan. 22, 2021. (Antonio Perez / Chicago Tribune)

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After just a few days of helping to distribute the COVID-19 vaccine at a Cook County health center, 2nd Lt. Alex Villafuerte has grown accustomed to the startled look on patients' faces when they walk in and see uniformed soldiers administering shots.

He acknowledges their surprise with a masked smile, explaining that the Guard recently has been activated to speed up the state's vaccination program. If he's unable to allay their concerns, he reaches into the right breast pocket of his uniform and pulls out his own vaccination card showing he received the shot Tuesday at the same location.

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Villafuerte's effort shows the delicate dance the Illinois National Guard must perform. No one questions the troops' ability to bolster the massive operation's efficiency or pace, but there have been debates nationwide concerning whether uniformed soldiers would fuel baseless conspiracy theories about the government's motive for mass immunizations and exacerbate vaccine hesitancy.

"We're trying to squash the conspiracies," said Villafuerte, who lives in the Back of the Yards neighborhood. "I use my (immunization) card to show them it's not a conspiracy. It's a real thing, and we're very lucky to have the vaccine. As members of the Illinois National Guard, we're just here to help."

The assistance comes as nearly 1.1 million people across Illinois have been infected with the virus. On Friday, the [reported death toll](#) reached 18,615 statewide since the start of the pandemic.

Gov. J.B. Pritzker activated the Guard this month [to help distribute vaccines](#) as they become more widely available to the public, though [he's warning](#) that demand will continue to exceed supply. The state will move into phase 1b Monday, as an

estimated 3.2 million residents will become eligible for their first round of shots. The allowed group includes people older than 65, teachers, first responders and other front-line workers.

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More than 200 Guard members have been activated so far, and the governor plans to activate about 400 total to all regions of the state. The first soldiers arrived in Cook County on Tuesday and are now helping to administer vaccines at six suburban locations. The Guard members were not vaccinated before arriving, but can receive the shot at the end of the day if there are any leftover doses that would otherwise spoil.

At Cook County Health's North Riverside Health Center, Guard members and the site's regular staff moved patients quickly through the vaccination process Friday. It took most people less than 30 minutes from the time they walked in the door for their scheduled appointment until the time they finished, including the required 15-minute waiting period to be monitored for immediate side effects.

"It's just a good feeling to be helping out the community," said Sgt. Johnny Newsome, who lives in the Rogers Park neighborhood. "You can tell how much the people appreciate it."

Unlike states that have been plagued by long lines, overflowing parking lots and angry patients, the North Riverside site had the calm, quiet vibe of an optometrist's office. A few people, however, did double takes upon walking inside and seeing uniformed troops.

None complained or expressed reservations.

"I think it's a phenomenal use of the National Guard," said Sophie Foucault, a speech language pathologist from Hawthorn Woods who received her first shot Friday. "I'm all for it. The more the merrier."

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As he waited in the recovery area, Jay Trivedi, a pharmaceutical scientist from Skokie, said the Guard's involvement with the vaccination program was in keeping with the military's overall mission.

"They swear an oath to protect the country," he said. "They protect us against enemies on the open battlefield and now they're protecting us against an invisible enemy. They are keeping their promise to protect us, and I'm grateful for it."

The 18 Guard members have helped Cook County health staff double the number of vaccinations it can administer each day, said Dr. Daniel Vittum, the site's lead physician. The soldiers include military medics to give the shots, as well as logistical support teams to take patients' temperatures, escort them to the examination rooms and stay with vaccine recipients for 15 minutes after their shots to watch for immediate side effects.

On Friday, the North Riverside site planned to give 180 shots of the Pfizer vaccine. There were another 276 scheduled for Saturday, Vittum said.

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“With their military background and organization, they (the Guard members) are bringing efficiencies and teamwork,” Vittum said. “They move people through quickly, and it has just been great to have them.”

The Illinois National Guard has played in key role in implementing the state’s COVID-19 response since the earliest days of the pandemic. Last March, troops established [the first state-run testing sites](#) and ran them with military precision as they performed more than 233,000 tests over a four-month period.

After spending the spring and summer testing people for COVID-19, some soldiers have returned to vaccinate the public. Others have embraced their first chance to fight against a virus that has killed [more than 410,000 people](#) in the U.S.

“I’m grateful to be here,” said Mia Mapa of Aurora, an EMT in the National Guard and a student at Northern Illinois University. “I know how lucky we are to have the vaccine in the United States, and I didn’t want to miss an opportunity to play a part.”

Stacy St. Clair
Chicago Tribune



Stacy St. Clair joined the Chicago Tribune in 2007. Before that she reported for the Daily Herald, the Dayton Daily News and The Topeka Capital-Journal. She has received numerous national honors for her work. Stacy has a journalism degree from the University of Missouri-Columbia, with minors in American politics and Spanish.

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