



Florence Teresi, 63, a resident of Eastern Christian Children's Retreat, a nonprofit that runs homes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, receives her first dose of COVID-19 vaccine on Friday.

COURTESY OF EASTERN CHRISTIAN CHILDREN'S RETREAT

NJ residents with disabilities begin to get COVID-19 shots

Gene Myers

NorthJersey.com

USA TODAY NETWORK – NEW JERSEY

It's been a tough slog — getting New Jersey residents with the most severe disabilities vaccinated during the pandemic — but advocates, who struggled to find COVID vaccines through various channels, say they are starting to make headway.

On Friday, 100 residents with devel-

opmental disabilities who live in homes across Bergen and Passaic counties run by Eastern Christian Children's Retreat were some of the first of the state's most medically fragile residents to get vaccinated.

Florence Teresi, 63, is "severely mentally and physically disabled," said her brother John Teresi. She lives on ECCR's main campus in Wyckoff, where nurses are available around the clock.

"She doesn't really put sentences or

even words together. Her condition is pretty severe," he said.

John Teresi, who is 60 and lives in North Haledon, is her legal guardian.

"She was born in 1958, so there was no firm diagnosis. Back then they called it brain damage and mental retardation," he said.

Teresi said he has been "extremely worried" about his sister since the start

See DISABILITIES, Page 4L

Disabilities

Continued from Page 1L

of the pandemic.

"About 15 years ago she had major surgery that took 18 inches of her bowel out. She had a very severe infection. She has had issues through the years," he said. He's been praying for the day she would get vaccinated.

Like the estimated 9,000 other New Jersey residents with the most severe disabilities, she's been in quarantine since March without access to daily activities, which were shut down at the start of the pandemic in an effort to curtail its spread.

"She has been confined mostly to her room. But the staff has gone above and beyond, putting her in the rocking chair she has in her room or walking her to the cafeteria," her brother said.

Inoculation is the light at the end of the tunnel for a community whose lives have largely been put on hold since March, advocates said.

Daryl Rogers, CEO of Eastern Christian Children's Retreat, said he registered for vaccinations in December and gives luck a bit of the credit for being able to inoculate his residents and staff while the great majority of communities like his are still waiting for their chances.

"There is an irony behind it. We partnered with Walgreens and my brother is a pharmacist with Walgreens over in Bergenfield, so we connected the dots and he reached out to his contacts and I worked it from my angle. It turns out that he is actually coming with three other pharmacists, and he is going to give the first vaccinations here," Rogers said before the event.

Beyond serving people with developmental disabilities, Rogers considers the ECCR to be a long-term care facility with residents "who are medically compromised, with quite a few on feeding tubes and oxygen" living on his main campus while people with less severe health risks live in group homes in various locations.



Jacqueline Sledge, an employee at Eastern Christian Children's Retreat, waits to see if she feels any side effects after being given the COVID-19 vaccine on Friday. Staff members and volunteers got their shots after residents did.

CHRIS PEDOTA/NORTHJERSEY.COM

"I really wanted the CDC and the Department of Health to be aware that our residents are compromised," he said.

Vaccinations for Phase IA, which includes health care professionals, began in late December 2020, but it did not include individuals with disabilities, as initially promised by the state Department of Health, which opened vaccination sites to Phases 1B and 1C this month.

That left advocates scrambling on behalf of the community, which now has to compete with the state's estimated 3 million to 3.5 million residents in those categories. All of this makes vaccinations at ECCR a momentous occasion.

"By providing their residents and their staff with vaccines, ECCR is leading by example in such an important

way. It's really wonderful," said Paul Aronsohn, ombudsman for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities and their families, who was at the event.

A new vaccination program set up exclusively for group home residents with disabilities by the state Department of Health, kicked off last week, has other group home providers optimistic that the people they serve will also be getting vaccinated soon.

"My advice to others would be not to give up," Rogers said. "Keep working with vendors. There are a lot of logistics required, so it's important that organizations are looking into what's necessary to run a clinic, so when you do get the call you are ready to go."

Email: myers@northjersey.com

Twitter: @myersgene