

Local Holocaust Survivors Receive First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine

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Holocaust survivor Nina Serenko receives COVID-19 vaccine. (Danny Schwartz)

About 75 JFS employees were also vaccinated, along with about 50 Meals on Wheels volunteers.

About 170 Holocaust survivors received the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine on Friday, Jan. 29, at the Jewish Family Service (JFS) building in West Bloomfield.

Brother and sister Alfred Zydower and Anna Lindemann, ages 91 and 89 respectively, were among those at the JFS building receiving the vaccine.

Born in Germany, the siblings fled to Shanghai, China, in 1940 by way of Siberia.

“I feel fine,” Zydower of Madison Heights said after receiving the vaccine.

“No problem,” Lindemann of Oak Park added.

Neither Zydower nor Lindemann thought they’d see anything like the pandemic at this point in their lives, but as Holocaust survivors they have lived through much worse.

“You cannot really compare to the Holocaust era when all that suffering went on,” Zydower said. “Today, if you obey all the rules, you wear your mask and you stay at home, you’ve got nothing to worry about in a way.”

“Nobody is really bothering you here, you’ve got all your freedom, and nobody will ever call you “dirty Jew” like they did in Germany, even if they didn’t know you.”

Zydower thinks the development of the vaccine is a good sign.

“I believe it’s going to help tremendously,” he said. “If you do catch it still, it will not kill you and stuff like that. It will be more like you’re having a flu.”

The clinic came about when JFS contacted the Oakland County Health Division (OCHD) to see if their staff and volunteers could get vaccinated as essential workers. JFS, which helps Holocaust survivors year-round, also inquired about the survivors getting vaccinations, and the ball started rolling from there.

JFS CEO Perry Ohren said they did some pre-work before receiving the go-ahead, with JFS geriatric case managers reaching out to every survivor they knew in the area, amounting to over 400 in total. They asked the survivors about their interest if they were to have a vaccination clinic, as well as if they needed a ride.

JFS also got the word out through social media, the Holocaust Memorial Center and through the Holocaust program at Jewish Senior Life.

That Monday, JFS got the call: The clinic for the first dose would be that Friday.

“We scrambled,” Ohren said. “I work with lots of amazing people who figured out the logistics and today the Oakland County Health Division is scheduled to vaccinate 170 or so Holocaust survivors. Maybe 50 of them are getting rides here through JFS transportation.”

About 75 JFS employees were also vaccinated, along with about 50 Meals on Wheels volunteers. Some of the survivors served by JFS had already been vaccinated prior to the clinic.

While the pandemic has affected everyone, being able to help facilitate vaccinations to the Holocaust survivors, with all they’ve been through, renders Ohren nearly speechless.

“Of all of our sacred work, working with survivors anywhere from 75 to 105 years old, there’s nothing more important than to help survivors,” Ohren said. “For us to be able to do a homey clinic at a place that’s familiar to them, I don’t have words. I could cry.”

Careful Preparation

Ohren said the OCHD has been great to work with, and JFS helped educate them on what

they would be dealing with before they arrived.

“We created an interesting flyer on the concept of trauma-informed care, to think about what it might be like for a survivor to have to stand in line, to smell something, to have somebody come at them with a needle,” Ohren said. “We did a mini-crash course so the folks who are vaccinating have a sense of who the main audience is that they’re vaccinating.”

Oakland County Medical Director Dr. Russell Faust was leading the charge at the clinic, and believes it’s owed to the most vulnerable to get them protected.



Holocaust survivor Edith Bernstein receives COVID-19 vaccine Danny Schwartz | Detroit Jewish News

“We’re trying to get every dose into as many arms as possible, so I think it’s important that we get out and vaccinate the most vulnerable in our community, and certainly Holocaust survivors, based on age alone, meet that criteria,” Faust said.

While Zydower and Lindemann didn’t mention any similarities between the pandemic or vaccinations with the Holocaust, Missy Lewin, JFS’s director of Holocaust Survivor Services, has seen survivors respond on both ends of the spectrum.

“We see people who feel cooped up again, and it’s starting to trigger them of those memories they have, and then we’re also seeing people who are saying ‘this isn’t the Holocaust, we know we’re going to be safe and we’re able to get out’ — so we’re really seeing both extremes,” Lewin said.

“We know so many things can be triggering for them, especially coming here today with medical personnel, so we really tried to prep for that and walk the survivors through that.”

The survivors received the Moderna vaccine and will receive the second shot on March 1 to avoid doing it on Feb. 26, which is Purim.

There is a tentative plan for another clinic, in collaboration between Jewish Senior Life and JFS. This would be in February, limited to survivors and their spouses. Details are still in the works.

‘No Problem’

Zoltan Rubin, 102, of Farmington Hills, born in Czechoslovakia, was among those receiving the first dose as well.

“Perfect. Couldn’t be better, no problem,” Rubin said after injection. “I hope it helps. I hope this vaccination will stop this unusual thing which is a tragedy for the whole world.”

Rubin, who comes from a family of 11 siblings, said he lost all but two brothers to the Holocaust.



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Speaking on how he's dealt with the isolation and consequences of the pandemic, Rubin said he's lucky that he has his daughter to help him, but otherwise it's very hard.

"I think God is trying to show people they have to believe in something, and people should realize they're here only on borrowed time, they're not here forever, and they should always consider their behavior towards other people around them and all over the world," Rubin said.

"We should realize we are here because we are allowed to be here."

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