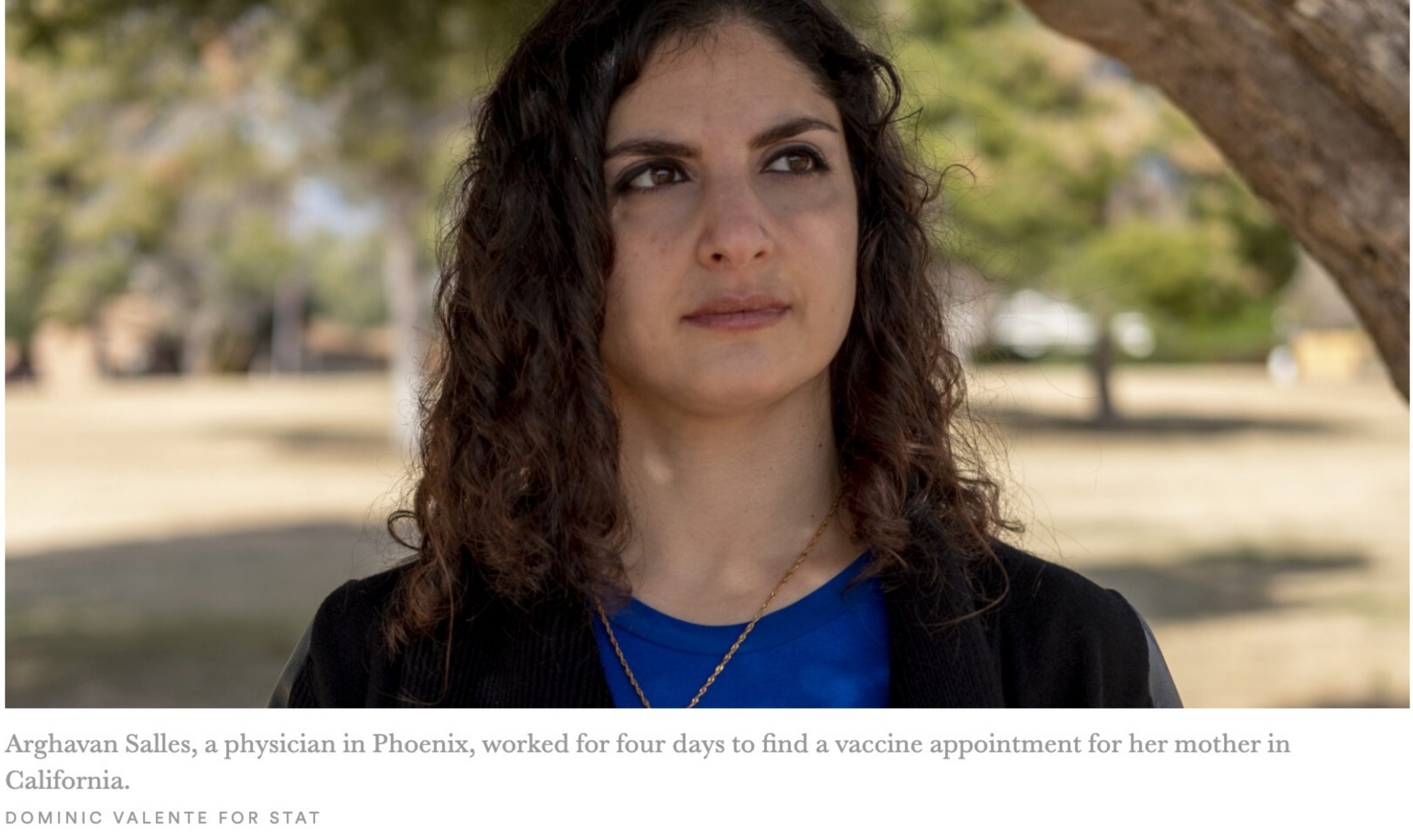


HEALTH

‘Just utter chaos’: A Twitter thread offers a window into the frustrating search for Covid-19 shots

By **Nicholas St. Fleur** Jan. 28, 2021

Reprints



Arghavan Salles, a physician in Phoenix, worked for four days to find a vaccine appointment for her mother in California.
DOMINIC VALENTE FOR STAT

As a physician working in an intensive care unit in Phoenix, Arghavan Salles has spent the past several months desperately trying to keep Covid-19 patients alive. She knows all too well how terrifying it is for them to be alone in a hospital room, away from their family and dependent on a machine for their every breath. That’s why earlier this month she was feverishly searching online and poring over state public health websites in an attempt to book a vaccination appointment for her mother in California.

But like so many other Americans trying to navigate the vaccination process for themselves and for loved ones, Salles found herself drowning in an ocean of false leads and dead ends.

“It’s just utter chaos,” said Salles. “We’re all just desperate to figure out how to get this for the people who matter most in our lives and it’s very, very challenging, and so super frustrating.”

Defeated, Salles took to Twitter to recount her endeavor and vent. Dozens of people from across the country [commented on her thread](#) with similar experiences and frustrations.

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One person recounted how she tried to sign up her 87-year-old mother in Texas for appointments in three different counties, each to no avail. Another in Illinois lamented being unable to get any information on vaccinating their 86-year-old mother who is immunocompromised.

A man shared that his 79-year-old father in Virginia was put on hold for more than an hour and a half trying to book an appointment — only to be disconnected. And one woman recounted how over the course of six days, she and her two siblings tried to book appointments for their 90-year-old parents in New York City. Of the two appointments the siblings made, one ended up getting canceled, but luckily both parents were vaccinated at the second appointment.

“I was surprised at how many people from how many places were spending a lot of time trying to find vaccines for their loved ones,” said Salles. “So many people are spending hours and hours trying to just schedule what should be a very simple thing.”



Salles shows a photo of her mother.
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With the vaccine rollout left mostly up to states and counties, they have had to rapidly devise their own methods for distributing shots to their residents. Every state has its own priority system and way of scheduling appointments, which sometimes change week to week. The complicated logistics paired with inconsistent communication to the public has resulted in mass confusion. The result: People are spending hours seeking information and searching for coveted appointment slots.

Salles’ experience is illustrative. At first, she thought a simple Google search for “How to get Covid vaccine Santa Clara County” would do the trick. That led to a county website that explained who was eligible for a shot. Her 70-year-old mother met the eligibility requirements listed. But the website didn’t explain how to schedule an appointment. Instead, it directed people to reach out to their health care providers, while also listing several health care systems to contact.

Salles decided to check the website for her mother’s health insurance provider, but she said it just led her to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s website. She clicked on a link there for California and found it had no specific information about scheduling an appointment. So she went to the California public health department website and found a section labeled “When, where, and how can I get a vaccine?” It seemed promising, she thought, but ultimately it didn’t offer her any further information on how to actually schedule an appointment.

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In parts of Florida like Collier County, people have been instructed to use the event management website Eventbrite to book their appointments. Kate Messner, a children’s book author in New York spent an hour trying to figure out how to get an appointment for her parents, aged 81 and 87, when she stumbled upon the Eventbrite link. The page said the registration was opening in just half an hour, so she waited anxiously for the time to wound down and successfully snagged a booking before they were all taken.

“Registering via Eventbrite was a lot more like trying to get Springsteen tickets than trying to get a doctor’s appointment,” she said.

Others, like Leila Mureebe, a vascular surgeon in North Carolina, were not as fortunate using Eventbrite. Mureebe was on the website at 9 one morning as signups were opening to try to book vaccinations for her 83-year-old parents, who also live in Collier County. But after requesting two appointments, she was booted off the service and lost her place in line. That happened about four or five times, she said, before the system told her that all the spots were gone. So instead, her parents braved the long lines at a mass vaccination site 2 1/2 hours away in Miami.

“This is an unnecessary side effect of the vaccine,” said Mureebe. “Older people have it rough enough with depression and all the other things due to the social isolation from this virus. This is precisely the last thing they need.”

One night after working on and off for two days trying to book an appointment, [Diana Libuda](#), an assistant professor of biology at the University of Oregon, was able to snag a last-minute spot for her 79-year-old mother in San Diego the following morning at the Petco Park baseball stadium.

“I truly felt like I won the lottery,” she said. During a previous attempt she had found one open slot that disappeared as soon as she typed her mother’s information into the webpage.

Vineet Arora, an academic hospitalist at the University of Chicago Medicine, was using three different computer screens and her phone to try and book vaccinations for her parents in Maryland, aged 75 and 73, and her children’s caretaker in Illinois, who is 67. But every time she filled in their health information on the vaccination websites, she said the application would crash.

“It’s basically a free-for-all,” said Arora. “It’s a mess, and it’s incredibly unfair to have a first-come first-served system, and inefficient.” Thanks to a tip from a friend on Facebook she was able to get an appointment for her children’s caretaker.

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Interspersed between the comments on Salles’ Twitter thread from those struggling to get an appointment were responses from other people offering advice on how they were able to successfully get a vaccine. They shared vaccination site dashboards such as [VaccinateCA](#), which was compiled by volunteers, and other resources they came across.

“Somebody retweeted my tweet,” she said, “and said something like, ‘Turns out if you want to know how to get a vaccine in this country, you have to follow Arghavan Salles.’”

Salles tried every tip she was given, including downloading an app for a \$200 concierge primary care service that said it could find her an appointment. Though the app waived its fee, it too proved fruitless for Salles. Finally days after she first tried, she was able to book an appointment for her mother at Stanford Health Care, about an hour’s drive from her home, for Feb. 1. That information came courtesy of a friend who worked there and had alerted Salles that the system was opening up its vaccinations to patients over the age of 65. Salles said she was optimistic, but still felt there was a chance it wouldn’t work out in the end.

“It shouldn’t take four days for me to try to figure out, and have to crowdsource from thousands of people, how to get my mother a vaccine when we’re trying to vaccinate everyone,” said Salles.

About the Author

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Nicholas St. Fleur

General Assignment Reporter, Associate Editorial Director of Events

Nicholas covers the intersection of race, medicine, and the life sciences.

nicholas.stfleur@statnews.com
[@SciFleur](https://twitter.com/SciFleur)

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