

Restaurant workers hit mobile clinic to get COVID-19 shots before the expected surge in customers

By [Stefano Esposito](#) All photos: Pat Nabong / Sun-Times Updated May 18, 2021, 2:41pm CDT



Leigh Arn, who works at Utopian Tailgate, fills out a form before receiving the COVID-19 shot Tuesday at West Town Bakery and Diner in the East Ukrainian Village neighborhood, Tuesday morning, May 18, 2021. Humboldt Park Health and The Fifty/50 Restaurant Group distributed free Pfizer COVID-19 vaccines to people, including restaurant workers, Tuesday.

Leigh Arn gets why the rules about mask wearing are finally changing, but she wishes they hadn't come quite so quickly.

"It would be nice if we could hold off a little bit longer until all of the staff was vaccinated," said Arn, 24, a server at Utopian Tailgate in Old Town.

Nevertheless, she seized on the opportunity to get vaccinated Tuesday when her employers, working with Humboldt Park Health, set up a mobile vaccination clinic outside West Town Bakery, 1916 W. Chicago Ave.

"I'm excited," Arn said. "It's been difficult to get an appointment. So it's nice that they set this up for us."

Scott Weiner, co-founder of the Fifty/50 Restaurant Group, which includes Utopian Tailgate and West Town Bakery, said they organized the event primarily to help restaurant workers across the city, although the clinic was open to anyone. About 200 people registered for Tuesday's event.

"A lot of restaurant workers are Hispanic and Latino, and they don't come to work with their laptop over their shoulders and they also are on their feet during their shift. So they don't really have the opportunity to sit in front of their computer and search for 'Where can I get a vaccine,'" he said.

Weiner is requiring all of his 500 or so employees to be fully vaccinated by July 15; about 75% already are, he said.

"The biggest thing I've heard over the course of the pandemic is that service industry workers don't necessarily feel safe because they have to be around guests. They don't have the luxury to work from home or isolate 6 feet from their employees," Weiner said.

Nobody has quit nor have employees complained about the mandate, he said. Still, when local media picked up on the story, Weiner received some slightly disturbing emails.

“I started getting everything from death threats to Russian hackers coming after us. It’s been pretty wild.”

Though customers now don’t have to, all of his employees will be required to wear masks “until I’m 100% sure that everyone is vaccinated,” Weiner said.

Weiner said he intends to rely on the “honor system” when it comes to customers entering his restaurants without a mask.

Arn said it would be all but impossible to do it any other way.

“We are crowded all the time now. People are so excited to be going back out, how are you going to stop every single person and go: ‘Are you vaccinated? Are you vaccinated?’”

She added: “It starts the interaction with abrasiveness. You want people to be welcome in your establishment and be there to have a good experience.”

Several restaurant workers had reasons somewhat unrelated to their work for wanting to get vaccinated.

“I’m sitting on so much flight credit right now because of 2020,” said Jalil Shomari, 25, who works at Roots Handmade Pizza in the South Loop, and is planning trips to Japan and the Philippines.

Weiner said a challenge he is facing is hiring more employees. With the demand for dining increasing, he wants to bring in another 250 people.

“It’s not so much that we’re having a challenge finding employees,” he said. “We’re having a lot of people apply, but everybody is hiring right now. So if you’re not real quick at setting up an interview, chances are they are going to interview somewhere else.”



The Fifty/50 Restaurant Group co-founder Scott Weiner outside West Town Bakery and Diner in the East Ukrainian Village neighborhood.



Nurse practitioner Tomasa Valencia puts a bandage on Marty Pelayo after he received a COVID-19 vaccination Tuesday at a mobile clinic parked outside West Town Bakery



Jalil Shomari, an employee of Roots Handmade Pizza, got vaccinated Tuesday at a mobile clinic set up outside the West Town Bakery and Diner.



People wait to receive the COVID-19 vaccination Tuesday at a mobile clinic parked in front of West Town Bakery and Diner in the East Ukrainian Village neighborhood.