

Hiring Frenzy for Pharmacists as Covid-19 Vaccines Roll Out; CVS, Walgreens dangle signing bonuses, ramp up staffing to find thousands to administer shots, including retirees and the recently laid-off

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FULL TEXT

The nation's drugstores and groceries are racing to hire thousands of pharmacists and technicians to administer Covid-19 vaccines to the masses.

Pharmacies big and small were laying off pharmacists as recently as summer, as the profession's outlook grew dim. Now some of those same pharmacies and supermarkets are making public pleas, reaching out to retired workers and offering signing bonuses. Several retail pharmacy chains, including CVS Health Corp. and Walgreens Boots Alliance Inc., have agreed to work with the U.S. government to serve as Covid-19 vaccination sites .

"Calling all pharmacists, nurses and pharmacy techs," read a mass email to customers from CVS, in which the company said it is urgently hiring thousands of health-care professionals. CVS, which employs 34,000 pharmacists and 65,000 technicians, declined to say how many workers it is hiring. The company is looking for both short-term and permanent workers.

Walgreens said it plans to hire about 25,000 people across the U.S., including 8,000 to 9,000 pharmacists and other health-care workers, to administer the vaccine . It employs 75,000 pharmacists and technicians.

Executives at both chains said this week they are confident they will have adequate manpower to administer the vaccines. "There is a sense of pride, of wanting to step up," said Rick Gates, a senior vice president at Walgreens.

"We have people coming out of retirement saying, 'I absolutely want to help.' "

Smaller chains and grocers, many of which have pharmacy counters, are less certain they'll find the workers, particularly when it comes to technicians. Technicians are typically hourly workers who are licensed to assist pharmacists with filling prescriptions, such as counting pills or answering customer questions.

"There's not enough people to immunize. It's going to take all hands on deck," said Aaron Wiese, chief health officer at Hy-Vee Inc. The Midwest grocer, which has roughly 1,300 pharmacy technicians in more than 270 pharmacies, is seeking to hire 1,000 more for the distribution of Covid-19 vaccines and tests.

The job market for pharmacists has been bleak for years, with the number of pharmacy-school graduates far outnumbering jobs. The U.S. Department of Labor expects the job market for pharmacists to shrink by 3% in the next decade, according to data from 2019.

Hundreds of independent and grocery-based pharmacies have closed , unable to handle high operating costs and make money. Big chains have either slowed store growth or begun to downsize as consumer purchasing, even of prescription drugs , has moved online. Meantime, declining drug-reimbursement rates have pinched profits. The fallout for working pharmacists has been fewer jobs and lower pay, along with a rougher workload .

"I'm not really interested in going back just to give shots," said Michael West, a pharmacist who was laid off with a severance package in July from Walgreens in North Carolina. Pharmacies "made these cuts and now they're begging for people to come back," he said.

Mr. West, who spent more than two decades as a pharmacist, including at CVS, said he plans to remain in retirement. He said he felt increasing pressure over the years to pump out prescriptions at the expense of spending time with customers, while tracking down lower-cost treatments that can require getting approval from physicians. "It started to feel like I was basically pushing sales," he said.

A Walgreens spokeswoman said the company invests in technology and operational improvements in an effort to reduce the burden of routine tasks for pharmacists. "We are committed to providing high-quality and trusted pharmacy services to meet the needs of our customers, while also ensuring the well-being of each of our pharmacy staff members," she said.

More on the Pandemic

Walgreens, CVS and Rite Aid Corp., the third largest U.S. drugstore chain, combined have about 21,300 U.S. stores, about 1,000 fewer than five years ago. The number of grocery pharmacies declined for the first time in years in 2017, the latest year for which data is available, to 9,026, down from 9,344 in 2016.

"It's a supply and demand thing—we didn't have enough supply [a decade ago from pharmacy schools] and now we have too much supply," said Scott Knoer, president of the American Pharmacists Association. That oversupply will likely be enough to ensure enough workers to vaccinate the masses starting next year, he said. And the hiring spree is a bright spot for pharmacy school graduates and technicians, he said.

But for many in the field, the new jobs—many of which are short-term for the duration of vaccination efforts—are less attractive than a long-term spot. Median annual pay for a pharmacist was \$128,090 in 2019; pharmacy technicians made \$33,950 a year, according to the Labor Department.

Pharmacists' wages have grown more slowly than the overall workforce, and the field has added fewer jobs. The median hourly wage for pharmacists rose 4.8% between 2016 and 2019 while wages rose 7.5% for all occupations, according to Labor Department statistics.

Pharmacists require a doctoral or professional degree. Pharmacy technician jobs require a high-school diploma or equivalent. Employers may require additional training or education.

Pharmacies have looked to hire more technicians in recent years to free up pharmacists from administrative tasks. The pace of that hiring is intensifying ahead of the Covid-19 vaccination drive. Technicians were cleared in October by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to administer Covid-19 vaccines, though each state has different requirements.

Beyond giving shots, technicians review vaccine history, handle consent forms and schedule appointments for two-dose vaccines, companies say. They also can help with spacing out patients and encouraging distancing in their stores.

Chains say that it is tough to keep track of varying state rules that determine which jobs pharmacy technicians can do and the qualifications they need.

Koninklijke Ahold Delhaize NV's Hannaford grocery chain, which has more than 180 stores with pharmacies in the Northeast, is encouraging technicians to get certified to administer vaccinations by offering a one-time bonus, said John McGrath, vice president of pharmacy services at Ahold Delhaize's services business.

Immunization certification includes various credentials such as CPR training. In addition to training staff, Ahold Delhaize has also hired per-diem pharmacists and continues to look for technicians, he added.

Hy-Vee is targeting former pharmacy workers, especially those in rural areas whose shops closed due to competition and who left the industry. "We're all going after the same pool," said Mr. Wiese, the chief health officer, adding that competitors are coming after his technicians with signing bonuses.

The Covid-19 Job Market

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