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WATERLOO REGION

# Tears, relief, as pop-up clinics give vaccine to vulnerable adults

Special sites for developmentally disabled adults and their caregivers are designed to be inviting and familiar

By **Catherine Thompson** Record Reporter

**KITCHENER** — Patti Weisner’s eyes filled with tears after her son Blair got his COVID-19 vaccine Saturday.

It was a day of mixed emotions for Patti. Right after getting the shot at the clinic at KW Habilitation, she let out an ebullient “Woo-hoo!” But as she and Blair waited to make sure they had no adverse effects from the vaccine, she felt both relief and more intense emotions, and the tears welled up.

“I think you don’t realize how much stress and worry we’re all feeling,” Patti said.

Blair, 44, and his mom were among hundreds who were vaccinated this weekend in special pop-up clinics run for people with developmental disabilities and their caregivers.

Blair, sporting a Mickey Mouse face mask, said the vaccination was so smooth, he didn’t even feel the needle.

A steady stream of people moved through the Kitchener clinic Saturday. As they left, they got a sticker that read, “I got my jab at KW Hab.” Some paused for a selfie in front of a colourful hand-painted poster.

“We’ve had tears. We’ve had lots of appreciation and gratitude,” said Tracy Franks, vaccination lead at the KW Habilitation clinic.

Three organizations are running the appointment-only clinics, which run for several days over the next week or two. The collaboration between KW Habilitation, Community Living Cambridge and Sunbeam Community and Developmental Services is unique in the province, said KW Habilitation executive director Ann Bilodeau.

“We realized the larger vaccination sites could be intimidating for many of our clients,” with the crowds, extra noises and unfamiliar settings, Bilodeau said. Many clients have elderly parents, or don’t have access to computers or the internet, making it challenging to book an appointment.

Holding the clinics at the agencies meant clients could go to a familiar, more intimate setting that many have already visited for courses or programs, and that is completely accessible for those in wheelchairs or walkers.

A variety of people and groups pulled together to make it happen. Public health helped with protocols and logistics. The three agencies running the clinics tapped into their networks to find health practitioners to give the shots — a pharmacist board member called upon colleagues, a consulting nurse recruited other nurses. Staff gave up their weekend to make sure the clinics flowed smoothly.

The clinics provide extra support if needed — clients can bring in a support person, and vaccinators will go out to a client’s car if they can’t wear a mask or can’t come into the building.

Allie Libertini, 26, of Waterloo, said having the vaccine will make her feel safer when she goes to work at her restaurant job. “I was a little nervous” about getting the shot, she admitted. “But with lots of preparation from my family and confidence, I knew I could do it. Once I got the vaccination, I was over the moon.”

“We feel very happy and relieved,” said her mom, Ellen Libertini. “Allie is out in the community, and we had heard there is an elevated risk for people with Down syndrome.”

“The next step is to do mobile clinics,” Bilodeau said. “We do have some people that are medically fragile.”

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Organizers will run clinics as long as they have vaccines. They are contacting clients directly to book appointments, but Bilodeau said anyone with a developmental disability, plus one caregiver, can book an appointment by contacting the organizations at [kwhab.ca](http://kwhab.ca), [Sunbeamcommunity.ca](http://Sunbeamcommunity.ca), and [CommunitylivingCambridge.ca](http://CommunitylivingCambridge.ca).

“This will be one more step to safety, and one more step to allow people to visit with their families,” Bilodeau said. People living in congregate settings are currently only allowed to visit with family outdoors.

“Our philosophy is, ‘No one to be left out,’” Bilodeau said.



**Catherine Thompson** is a Kitchener-based reporter focusing on urban affairs for the *Waterloo Region Record*.

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