

Amazon starts push to vaccinate thousands of its warehouse workers in Washington state for COVID

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There was more than a little partying in the air at Amazon's first COVID-19 vaccination clinic for its warehouse and delivery workers in Washington state Monday.

In a [conference room](#) festooned with balloons and streamers, just off the deafening hum of the company's warehouse floor in Kent, grinning workers rolled up their sleeves to show their fresh Band-Aids and snapped photographs next to a selfie wall. "I GOT VACCINATED," read a massive balloon display on the way out of the clinic.

"At first, I was hesitant to take the shot," said Amazon senior operations manager Alex Ivanov, who was vaccinated at the clinic Monday. Ivanov said he was nervous that the vaccine had been authorized for emergency use before receiving Food and Drug Administration approval—but as he watched friends and family get their shots with no ill consequences, he decided to join them.

Plus, he said, he's looking forward to visiting his parents in St. Petersburg, Russia, for the first time

since before the pandemic. "There's a lot of convenience, having it on site. If it wasn't on site, I probably wouldn't have done it," he said.

By the end of the clinic Saturday, the company aims to have given thousands of its Washington warehouse and delivery workers, contractors and their families the first shot of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine. A second vaccination clinic will open Tuesday at a Spokane warehouse, followed by additional vaccination opportunities at other Amazon facilities in the state, company spokesperson Karen Riley Sawyer said.

The clinics fulfill Amazon's goal, expressed in a letter last year to Gov. Jay Inslee, of vaccinating its front-line workers as soon as they become eligible. Amazon's vaccination efforts, which kicked off last month in the Midwest, also serve as a rebuke to Amazon's critics, who over the past year have lambasted what they described as the company's inadequate safety precautions.

The experience of Amazon workers during the pandemic emerged as a symbol of the divergent realities for the company's office and warehouse workers over the past year. Tens of thousands of Amazon's corporate employees have been allowed to work from home for more than a year, the value of their compensation packages rising as Amazon share prices soared.

Meanwhile, the company's roughly 1 million warehouse workers globally were still expected to report to their facilities, where workloads surged even as the virus ravaged communities.

As concerns about the spread of the coronavirus at Amazon intensified, warehouse workers stopped showing up to work en masse. The company rolled back COVID-19 benefits for warehouse employees,

including pay bumps and unlimited unpaid sick leave. (Amazon has said its workers contracted the virus at rates comparable to or lower than nationwide averages, and that it's not clear whether its infected workers got sick at work or in their communities.)

Amazon, like many companies, made what would later be seen by its critics as blunders as it strove to adhere to rapidly evolving public health guidance during the pandemic's initial onslaught. Initially, employees said, they were required to stay only 3 feet apart and were not checked for coronavirus symptoms before starting their shifts. New recruits described being crammed into tiny rooms to complete paperwork as Amazon embarked on one of the largest hiring sprees in U.S. history, onboarding more than 400,000 workers in 10 months to meet pandemic-juiced demand for online shopping.

Anger over Amazon's response to the virus helped propel an unprecedented wave of organizing among Amazon workers in Seattle, New York, Michigan, Germany, Italy and, most notably, Alabama, the site of a rare, high-profile unionization attempt. That effort ended in defeat after a lopsided vote count this month, though the union representing Amazon workers has challenged the results over what it says was Amazon's illegal conduct during the election.

By midsummer, the company—and many warehouse employees—said Amazon had made major changes to its safety protocols to better protect workers from the coronavirus.

The ire heard at the start of the pandemic that Amazon workers were compelled to go to work, where they were falling ill while shipping frivolous items—like sex toys—has largely faded.

Still, warehouse workers, including at the Kent facility, say a steady drumbeat of notifications that their colleagues have tested positive for the coronavirus continue to arrive in their email inboxes. Last month, Amazon was forced to close a warehouse outside of Toronto as cases there spiked.

Some of Amazon's health and safety measures were evident at the Monday clinic, where signs with a picture of the elusive Sasquatch reminded employees to spread out: "Social distancing expert—if Bigfoot can maintain a 6 foot distance, so can you!" An employee in a plexiglass booth remotely scanned clinic-goers' temperatures as they entered the building.

Soft jazz played inside the clinic, which took place in a conference room named after Seattle grunge band Candlebox with Amazon's 14 leadership principles painted on the walls. Pharmacists from Walgreens pushed a rolling vaccination cart along the rows of Amazon workers and partners who had signed up to get their shots.

Alfonzia Bell, who has worked in the Kent warehouse for five years, said he was "really, really excited" to get his vaccine at the clinic Monday afternoon. As soon as he's fully vaccinated, he said, he wants to go on a "long drive, go to a hotel room," maybe in Ocean Shores or the San Juans, "and just —" he mimed throwing open the windows, sighed, and grinned, "relax."

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