

We're our own worst enemy in COVID fight

Hoppy Kercheval

August 31, 2021

Just two months ago, it seemed West Virginia had the COVID-19 virus licked. The number of active cases dropped below 1,000. Hospitalizations for the virus were down to a couple dozen.

Unfortunately, the good news was temporary.

The rate of vaccinations dried up just as the new delta variant was moving into West Virginia. Now, cases are spiking again. Hospitalizations are at more than 600, while the number of active cases has surged to nearly 17,000.

The death toll is up to 3,084.

Many West Virginia hospitals now require employees to get vaccinated as a condition of employment. Public schools are struggling with mask policies, while attempting to keep children in school and avoid chaotic remote instruction.

Sadly, much of this could have been avoided, if more West Virginians had been willing to get vaccinated. As of Tuesday, 50.9% of West Virginians have been full vaccinated, and the number is only slowly inching up.

No vaccine is 100% effective, so there are breakthrough cases. Department of Health and Human Resources figures show there have been 1,975 deaths since the start of the vaccine effort in West Virginia, but only 4% of the deaths have been breakthrough cases.

The unvaccinated account for nearly all of the hospitalizations in West Virginia. WVU Medicine, the largest health care provider in the state, reports that 90% of its COVID-19 patients have not gotten the shot.

Despite the statistics and the repeated assurances that the vaccine is safe and effective, tens of thousands of West Virginians refuse to get vaccinated. One of the common refrains is that choosing not to get vaccinated is a matter of personal freedom. “My body, my choice.”

The “freedom” issue is more complicated than that. Robert Levy, chairman of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, posed the question: “If the vaccine causes no appreciable injury, can you still refuse to be injected, notwithstanding that you might be visiting significant risks on others?”

His answer is that, in the midst of a health emergency, “narrowly-tailored, time-limited rules” requiring vaccines may be justified because the actions (or in this case inaction) by an individual may affect others.

“Even those who resist government intervention in private matters will endorse rules that bar some persons from violating the rights of others,” Levy wrote.

That is the salient point, since, as the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states, “Vaccines are playing a crucial role in limiting the spread of the virus and minimizing severe disease. Low vaccination coverage in many communities is driving the current rapid surge in cases involving the Delta variant, which also increases the chances that even more concerning variants could emerge.”

When the vaccines first came out, tens of thousands of West Virginians stepped up to distribute and receive vaccines. We were a great success story — for a while. Now, six months later, we are our own worst enemy.