

Volunteers helping elderly, poor bridge CoWin divide

Ketaki.Desai@timesgroup.com

The urban angst with navigating CoWin is well-documented with many tech-savvy folks relying on apps and Telegram alerts to get vaccine appointments. In rural areas and poorer urban settlements, the problem's worse with digital access limited and language barriers.

Now, some volunteers are trying to help those who can't navigate English apps and smartphones to figure out a way to get the jab. In Kerala, students from the Government Vocational Higher Secondary School in East Marady, around 38km from Kochi city, are helping people, especially senior

THE HURDLES

- > App is only in English
- > Smartphone, digital literacy is a must
- > Only 4 can register with one number while families are bigger in rural areas

WHO IS HELPING

- > Kerala students reaching out
- > NGOs like Aajeevika Bureau and Transform Rural India are working in various states
- > Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand have set up help desks
- > In rural Maharashtra, admin officials uploading regn online

citizens, in their localities get registered for the vaccination.

▶ Register offline, P 10

Maharashtra villagers register offline, admin puts it online

▶ From P 1

K Anandavally, an elderly woman in Marady, is thrilled that she got her name registered in the app with the help of these volunteers. "I don't know how to use a smartphone and I use the phone for only making calls. Besides, the app is in English. So, a student helped me to register and I have got a slot for next month," she says.

Similarly, rural fintech company Spice Money began an initiative a week ago to register people using its network of 6 lakh merchants across the country. These merchants or *adhikaris*, usually kirana store owners, already act as a human point of financial services — for instance, they can act as ATM machines.

In the context of Covid, they're being deployed to register their neighbours. Dilip Modi, founder, says, "It's only been a week-long initiative, but we have registered 40,000 people on CoWin. We

wanted to act as responsible citizens and utilise our infrastructure."

While these volunteers can help people, they can't sort out vaccine supply issues. For instance, Transform Rural India Foundation is using its 100-odd youth volunteer network in rural Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand to register people. But Neeraj Ahuja, senior manager at the foundation, says, "Our

mobile number," she says. So now, in collaboration with the district administration, a new plan has been developed. As they continue tackling vaccine hesitancy, they're registering people offline and the local administration will upload their data on CoWin. Meanwhile, the Chhattisgarh government is setting up help desks at the level of panchayats, urban bodies, and municipal corporations to help the poor and vulnerable register.

In Jharkhand, the situation is similar, according to Prem Shankar of the Jharkhand CSO Forum. "Internet and mobile facilities are not available in many parts. The district administration is sharing a list of vaccination centres and setting up information booths where people can get registered and be told which age group is being vaccinated when. It's next to impossible for people in rural areas to register on CoWin."

— With inputs from TC Sreemol.

HELPING HANDS

youth hubs are helping people register, but the problem is getting slots right now."

Others are not using CoWin at all. Dr Sarika Kulkarni, founder of Raah Foundation which works in rural, tribal Maharashtra says, "Initially, our plan was to use young volunteers to sit with smartphones and register everyone in the village. But, in many of our locations, internet connections were very limited, and only four people can be registered on one