

13-year-old from Illinois creates vaccine appointments database

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Featured topic and speakers

In today's COVID-19 Update, Eli Coustan, a 13-year-old from Evanston, Illinois, and his mom, Hillary, talk about Eli's efforts to help people in need schedule vaccine appointments through the creation of a new website.

Eli's website, ILVaccine.org, continues to get 10,000+ unique visitors per day.

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Speakers

- Eli Coustan, founder and creator, ILVaccine.org
- Hillary Coustan

Transcript

Unger: Hello, this is the American Medical Association's COVID-19 update. Today we're talking to Eli Coustan, a 13-year-old from Evanston, Illinois who's helping people in need schedule their vaccine appointments. His mom Hillary is joining us today as well. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer in Chicago. Eli, I read a story about you in The Washington Post a few weeks ago, and it really resonated with me. I tried to help my mom, who's 86-years-old, get scheduled for a vaccination. It was hard enough to do one person and I kind of hung it up after that. But you have been helping a lot more people and I'm interested to hear your story. How did you get started with this?

Eli Coustan: At first, my grandparents were looking for the COVID vaccine appointment, and

eventually ... This was before I had created ILVaccine.org. So I was just kept checking Jewel-Osco and eventually an appointment came up and I was able to reserve it for them. But I realized that there were so many other people that didn't have somebody that could look for them and that were having issues getting the appointments, so that I helped some other friends of my grandparents. And from there, I realized that there were only so many people I could help. So that's why I created ILVaccine.org that, which is an appointment aggregator and availability list. It'll have the location name as well as the address, website and if there are appointments and who they're for.

Unger: Well, let's talk a little bit first before we get into the site, what are you hearing from your grandparents, from their friends that you're helping? How does this whole process feel?

Eli Coustan: I mean, it feels like it was not well planned out. It could have been more planned out by the federal government, I think, just so that it would be a smoother process for people to get the appointments.

Unger: You mean so you didn't have to check like a thousand different websites?

Eli Coustan: Yeah.

Unger: That might be nice. Did you ever expect that somebody on the other end might have like a... someone they know that works at The Washington Post? Did you ever expect this kind of work to get discovered?

Eli Coustan: I mean, before I created the website, when I was just helping people, I didn't I expect any sort of press coverage and I didn't want it. But it doesn't hurt. It was not something that crossed my mind that I would be in The Washington Post though.

Unger: Before this whole thing started, do you have a tech support business or something that gave you the skillset to be able to build a site like this?

Eli Coustan: I had built websites for things before. I had built one for my bar mitzvah, built one for some family friends, I built one for something. So I had built general websites before, but nothing with as many visitors as ILVaccine.org.

Unger: So that's pretty sophisticated stuff. You must have run into that situation where you're like, "I can't keep helping all these individuals." Where did this kind of idea then come from to build something bigger?

Eli Coustan: I noticed that there were other states that had a similar volunteer-run websites. This was at the beginning of February, I think. They were pretty big, not as big as they are now, but I got the inspiration from that. And I did some research and figured out how they were doing it. And I think within a day or two, I had a working prototype, which is... It doesn't look a ton like our current design,

but it was a working prototype of the site.

Unger: Hillary, you're kind of hearing this in the background, that your son's working on this thing. What are you thinking along the way, and how do you help?

Hillary Coustan: He's always loved technology, and so the interest in technology is not surprising. He's always wanting to help people and volunteer, so that was not surprising. What really shocked me was his instincts around the equity and access piece of it. He recognized very early that it would be problematic for him to start getting dozens of people contacting him every day, and how would he prioritize them? Because I said, "Well, there's an Evanston group. I could post something to Facebook if you want to find more people to help." And he said, "But if I'm inundated with people, how do I prioritize them?" And so that really surprised me, his understanding of the nuances of those issues with equity and access. And if you have two people in different counties and appointments in between them, how do you decide who gets that appointment, if you're that person helping people find the appointments?

And then also the privacy issues. I think he was really sensitive to the fact that people have to give him their information for him to book appointments. And so he had wanted to help teachers, for example, at his school. And we talked about, well, should he tell the principal to let the teachers know that he's available, but then they'd have to give him their birth date, their address, their phone number. And obviously, he's trustworthy. He's not going to do anything with it, but that's uncomfortable. And so between recognizing those issues and his background in technology and programming, I think he settled on the website pretty quickly as a way to handle some of those issues and just reach more people.

Unger: That makes a lot of sense. And those weren't issues necessarily that I was thinking of in terms of beyond the scale part of this. I noticed the message that's at the top of your website, discouraging people from going into areas that they don't normally go to get a shot. Where does that sensitivity come from in terms of the equity issues? You reading a lot about that?

Eli Coustan: I've read about it. I've heard about lots of people going to areas that they've never been to, especially underserved areas, and people in the underserved areas then having trouble to get the vaccine. So this is definitely something that I've been thinking about when I've designed the site and how I'm marketing the site and who I'm reaching out to. This is something I'm considering when I'm doing that. And that's why we're working on, for example, translating it into Spanish is something that we are working on as well, because we want to be able to reach as many people in all areas of the city and surrounding cities as possible.

Unger: How are you reaching your target audience, so to speak with the word about the site? Is it just kind of spreading organically from reading in the paper? Where is that coming from?

Eli Coustan: We've been on multiple media outlets, which have helped. And then I think it's in one of

the big vaccine hunter Facebook groups in the area, we've posted it there and other people have posted it. And it's in some of the other spreadsheets and documents that people have created linking to the site. And we're just reaching out to new people and working on new things, always.

Hillary Coustan: Just yesterday, right, to a publication?

Eli Coustan: Yeah, we reached out to a publication on Saturday as well, yeah.

Unger: It is a great story, and hopefully the word is getting out about your new site, ILVaccine.org. Can you tell me, how do you do this? Is this all volunteer driven? I've been to the site and I looked at the sites where you're saying they have a vaccine available, or you can make an appointment. How are you kind of keeping this updated, and what kind of obstacles are you running into, doing this?

Eli Coustan: I think we have 12 or 13 volunteers that are just updating data at the moment, somewhere from 10 to 13 that are just updating data. And then we've also been working on automating certain locations. So I think we're at... We've got a lot of locations where every seven minutes or so, it goes to the site, checks if those appointments, and updates the data so that it can be less work for volunteers and more accurate. There's someone we're in contact with, we're working to add more of those locations.

Unger: Is that hard to develop integrations with different sites like that? I imagine that's not necessarily the easiest and fastest thing to do. How are you finding that?

Eli Coustan: It depends on the site. Some of them are easier than others did because they're all using different systems. Some are not super complicated, some are much more complicated.

Unger: I notice that some of the bigger chains may be more difficult. Are you finding it works better with some and not others?

Eli Coustan: It all depends. For example, Walgreens, actually now without an account, you can get generalized details on the appointment availability, which is very useful. I understand that they don't want people to have very specific information about exactly what time slots, and that's restricted with the Walgreens.com account. But what is good is that without an account you're able to easily put in a zip code and see if any slots exist within 25 miles. So for example, that's something that we've integrated into the site.

Unger: Got it. Are you making any other kind of changes, anything planned to make it even easier to use?

Eli Coustan: I've been thinking about what type of other filters we can add, but I'm trying to make sure that I'm keeping in mind that we want it to be simple as well. So we're thinking about different ways that we can publicize, make it easier to use and to filter locations as well.

Unger: That's excellent. Hillary, what kind of feedback are you getting from folks who have been helped by the system?

Hillary Coustan: The feedback's been really, really positive. I had a friend from Texas reach out last week, and it turns out she knew people in two different states who'd used his website to get appointments for their parents. And this is a friend who knows Eli really well, but didn't know he was doing this. And as soon as they said, "Yeah, I think the website was in the paper." She read about it. She said, "That's Eli. That's Eli Coustan." So it's great to hear that it's helping so many people. Eli's gotten a lot of messages through the website of people he's helped. There've been lots of posts in different groups. And those are just the ones we know about. So it's really great to see that it's helping people and actually making a difference.

Unger: Eli, anything that you would want to tell physicians out in our audience, any advice, anything that you'd like to pass on to them?

Eli Coustan: Yeah. So first of all, thank you for all you've done, you're doing now and throughout the entire pandemic. I know that I'm very grateful and that almost everyone is very grateful for all the work you've been doing. And then second, I think what would help, I understand that not all of you will have control over this as you're part of a bigger system, but I think what would be helpful is to make sure that your health care systems are working with organizations like this in your state, whether that's Illinois or whether that's working with something like VaccinateCA in California or something else in another state, just to ensure that there's other sites that are doing this that have thousands of visitors every day, you just want to make sure that the information they're displaying is accurate and that you can work with them.

And then also to make sure that your websites you're providing transparency to a certain degree of who is getting the vaccine. I understand you can't say that if you are 62 a half, you're going to get your vaccine on April 25th. You can't say stuff like that, but something more just like, "We're vaccinating people 65 and older right now," and to wait for a scheduling ticket, instead of just saying, "We're doing 1B," but to say you know exactly which parts of 1B you're doing and if you're currently doing them or not, things like that.

Unger: Has this impacted anything about what you want to do when you're out in post-school world?

Eli Coustan: I mean, I want to make a positive change on the world.

Unger: Well, I'd say you're off to a pretty good start on that already. Thanks so much Eli, Hillary for

being with us here today. Eli, thanks for this work. It's really amazing to see people making a difference like you're doing right now. That's it for today's COVID-19 Update. We'll be back with another segment shortly. For more information about COVID-19, visit ama-assn.org/COVID-19. And if you're in Illinois, Eli, where should they go to check out where they can get a vaccine?

Eli Coustan: ILVaccine.org.

Unger: Awesome. Thanks for joining us today. Please take care.

Eli Coustan: Thanks for having us.

Hillary Coustan: Thank you.

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