**DHEC COVID-19 Vaccine Update Media Briefing**

**Jan. 6, 2021**

**Cristi Moore: Good afternoon everyone, I’m Cristi Moore, chief communications officer here at DHEC. I would like to welcome you to our continued discussion on Covid-19 vaccine in South Carolina. Today's media briefing will feature Dr. Brannon Traxler, DHEC interim public health director and Stephen White, DHEC immunizations director. We always like to thank our media partners for sending your questions in ahead of time for the facilitated question and answer portion, and for joining today and continuing this coverage in our state. Dr. Traxler will provide an update then we'll move into facilitated questions and answers, and if there's time left I'll open it up to the group for live questions and answers. So without further ado, Dr. Traxler if you can please provide today's update?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Good afternoon everyone, as of today South Carolina has received a federal allocation of 142,350 Pfizer vaccines for first doses which includes the 30,225 received just this week. 52,053 South Carolinians in Phase 1A have received their first dose of the vaccine and 1,075 have received their second doses, and 69,959 Phase 1A individuals have made appointments for vaccination.

We met with the Governor's office on Monday afternoon to discuss concerted efforts for increasing individual participation in Phase 1A. The CDC guidance originally provided a goal of having 70 percent of phase 1A individuals vaccinated before advancing to Phase 1B. Over this past weekend that guidance evolved to now suggest several variables to take into consideration for when to transition, with an overarching theme of basically supply exceeding demand, therefore to speed up people getting vaccinated. Phase 1A individuals or their employers must contact a provider to schedule an appointment for vaccination by the January 15 deadline to ensure priority for that vaccine to ensure priority for the vaccine. DHEC will evaluate demand up to January 15th to determine whether to then request that providers move forward with scheduling the next phase of vaccinations, or remain where they are as we work to ramp up vaccination operations across the state.

It's important to understand the number of doses is still currently very limited in South Carolina, like in all states. Phase 1A individuals who are eligible in South Carolina include hundreds of thousands of people, which is much larger than the number of current doses of vaccines we have, We continue to ask people to be as patient as you can to schedule that appointment to be vaccinated.

Employers are encouraged to reach out to their local hospitals as soon as possible, and no later than January 15 with a list of their employees names and email addresses who want to be vaccinated. In addition, individuals in Phase 1A who want to be vaccinated should contact your local hospitals to request an appointment no later than January 15. If there is not a hospital in your county you should contact the nearest hospital to you. Contact information for hospitals is available and will continue to be updated on our website at scdhec.gov. Individuals who are making appointments may need to present credentials to verify that they qualify to receive vaccination under Phase 1A, and that includes providing some proof: a badge, a business card, a license or a photograph of your license, personalized letter from your employer. Things such as this to show your Phase 1A qualification.

When presenting for the vaccination, South Carolina receives vaccines on a weekly basis. Appointments are subject to cancellation based on vaccines that are received from the federal government. Our ultimate goal is still to save South Carolinians lives. DHEC remains dedicated just as we have been this whole pandemic to working with our partners to ensure in this situation that everyone who wants to be vaccinated against Covid-19 in South Carolina will receive a vaccine. It is going to take some time to help South Carolinians better understand when we expect the vaccine will be available to them. We've created a timeline to help walk folks through the process.

I will tell you as vaccine supply increases, our recommendations for vaccination will expand to include more groups and eventually to go through phases two and possibly even a phase three.

This outline provides an overview of the estimated time frames for each phase, and you can see we've started on the far left hand side with supplies of vaccines started shipping December 13 to South Carolina. We received weekly shipments, you can see there the providers and when they did or will receive vaccine. Phase 1A in South Carolina started December 14, we're currently in that phase. We expect the Phase 1A to continue to late January or February of 2021. In late winter Phase 1B will include the groups of people that are aged 75 and older, regardless of whether they have any underlying health conditions or not. Those frontline essential workers and those sectors that have been identified by the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, ACIP, include firefighters and law enforcement officers and correction officers who are not included in Phase 1A. Student agricultural workers, United States Postal Service workers, manufacturing and grocery store workers, public transit workers as well as those who work in the educational sector - so teachers, school support staff, and day care workers. Phase 1C will be in early spring, this will include all people aged 65 to 74 years and older regardless of whether or not they have any underlying health conditions and people who are age 16 to 64 who have a one or more of certain underlying health conditions that would put them at higher risk for severe disease. That list of those certain health conditions is determined based on the science and data and is produced by the CDC.

In addition, other essential workers who were not vaccinated in 1B will be vaccinated in 1C, and the ACIP gives some examples of those such as people who work in transportation and logistics, food service, housing construction, finance, information technology, communications, energy, law, media public safety and then the public health staff who are non-front-line health care workers.

Phase two will begin, we anticipate, in late spring and continue through the summer into the fall. It will include all people who want to be vaccinated who haven't previously had the opportunity. The ages of people who it will be recommended for will be per the guidance from the ACIP- currently one vaccine is recommended for down to age 18 and the other one down to age 16, but neither are recommended for children at this time.

It is important to recognize that this is rapidly evolving. We keep mentioning this vaccine is unlike any vaccine that the world has ever dealt with before, so we do have to remain flexible in our response so that we continue to respond to those global and local challenges as they arise. This includes understanding that many of our hospitals are facing unprecedented stress on their systems right now.

We're currently working to expand the number of individuals who are qualified to administer the vaccine, including working with LLR to explore possibilities for retired nurses, students in their last year of nursing school and also DHEC is looking at EMTs. Paramedics have already been authorized if indicated by their local medical control to vaccinate. As more individuals are brought onboard we will keep sharing that information with you. Thank you and stay safe.

**Cristi Moore: Dr. Traxler we appreciate that update, at this point let's move right into our questions, and the first question that I have for today is who should private health care employees and anyone else in phase one contact to receive the vaccine, and does DHEC have a list of contacts to share with them?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Currently they should contact their local hospital, and a list of contacts is on our DHEC website and will continue to be updated. In addition, as additional providers are brought on and that will be available at scdhc.org/vaxfacts.

**Cristi Moore: What measures have been taken to ensure that no one in Phase 1A misses the opportunity to receive the vaccine?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Vaccinations do not have to be received by the Phase 1A members by January 15, but they do have to request that first dose appointment before then. Therefore communicating that deadline out to all Phase 1A members is how to prevent those members missing the opportunity. Communications is going to be blasted out by our partners at LLR to all of their licensees that are in that Phase 1A groups we're also going to be working with professional associations to share that information in addition you all as our valuable communication partners can help share this word as well.

**Cristi Moore: Is it accurate to say that DHEC had a policy in place that prohibited hospitals from vaccinating any non-employees before January 1st, which prevented hospitals from vaccinating those Phase 1A individuals in the community? If that's true, why was that direction given?**

**Dr. Traxler:** DHEC has always provided guidance for Phase 1A- we did clarify that guidance this previous Thursday or Friday. We hope this helps hospitals to understand that they are allowed to vaccinate Phase 1A members outside of their system and that we actually do encourage it.

**Cristi Moore: Under what circumstances or scenarios would it be possible for a South Carolina resident age 75 or older to receive the vaccine in North Carolina as part of its Phase 1B instead of waiting for South Carolina to move to its Phase 1B?**

**Dr. Traxler:** North Carolina would be making decisions about whom they will vaccinate and when they will be doing so- that would be up to that state.

**Cristi Moore: What is DHECs response to the governor's timetable announced yesterday, and secondly is the agency prepared to make the transition to Phase 1B on January 16?**

**Dr. Traxler:** DHEC, as I noted in my points, had met with the governor on Monday afternoon so we are prepared to make a transition if needed. To evaluate really is the most important thing - the demand for appointments and what appears to be the number of Phase 1A members who have or have not been requesting appointments by January 15 to make that decision. But we will be prepared whichever direction is necessary to go on January 16.

**Cristi Moore: The governor said yesterday that the bottleneck of vaccine administration is partly due to confusion over who's eligible, and said these categories are going to be clarified and broadened. What does that mean and have there been any changes in eligibility this week, and what sort of clarity has DHEC provided? And lastly what is DHEC’s reaction to his comments?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We did update the guidance document for Phase 1A on our website earlier today, we do want to note that the list of Phase 1A members on there may not be all inclusive but we are continuing to add members as the vaccine advisory committee recommends reviews and recommends that certain groups be added. So it is broadened and clarified, being a little bit more explicit about naming specific groups rather than broader categories.

**Cristi Moore: Stephen this set of questions is for you- what's the latest number of approved providers for the Covid-19 vaccines in South Carolina, and secondly who can become a vaccine permit provider- could it be a veterinarian, a physical therapist?**

**Stephen White:** We currently have 775 enrolled provider sites which have been approved, and that's just as of a few minutes ago. The second question was who can become a vaccine provider - licensed individuals within their scope of practice on HANS is the answer to that question, so as long as they can stay within their scope of practice on HANS.

**Cristi Moore: Thank you thank you Stephen. It was previously stated by DHEC that the agency is exploring all options to meet the need for healthcare workers to administer the vaccine. What efforts have been made to tap into groups like the National Guard, emergency medical staff and retired nurses to accelerate those efforts?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We are looking into all different groups as I noted in my talking points. We are having discussions with LLR our colleagues there, and working to see what can be done and explore the options for retired nurses who have let their license potentially expire, as well as senior-year nursing students and EMTs and potentially dentists. Those are all groups that we are exploring with LLR. We have authorized the state medical control physician and DHEC have authorized paramedics to vaccinate for Covid-19, if it's approved by their local medical control physician. And as I noted we're exploring that for EMTs as well. The board of medical examiners has provided guidance clarifying that vaccination can be performed using medical assistants, so we've shared that information when hospitals have inquired about that, and we also continue to remain in great partnership with the National Guard, who have been a huge assistance to us throughout this response with testing and helping in hospitals and vaccination. So we are working with them to determine where they are needed the most and where they can best assist the state, because as I noted they are still helping with the testing plan for the state, as well as within some hospitals and various facilities, helping them.

**Cristi Moore: If someone receives the full vaccine, do they have immunity indefinitely, or must it be administered again in the future?**

**Dr. Traxler:** The answer for that is to be determined. There are still studies being conducted- they are still following that those same people that were part of the clinical trials for phase three. They are studying the longevity of the effects on them and so we will know more information in the coming months.

**Cristi Moore: Stephen this question is for you how many people are estimated to be in Phase 1A in South Carolina and how is DHEC tracking or confirming when we hit the target of offering the vaccine to 70 percent?**

**Stephen White:** Since the ACIP has provided their guidance and DHEC has expanded our guidance we're estimating that there's around 350,000 individuals in the Phase 1A. We are tracking that the doses that are administered in the federal system, which is the Vaccine Administration Management System, known as VAMS, in addition to looking at the doses that are administered. We're also looking at vaccine appointments as healthcare workers are reaching out to their providers. As a whole we are continuing to monitor and report on these numbers on a daily basis, so we will be reporting on that as we get closer to that threshold. I do want to note too, that as the CDC guidance says evolving, DHEC guidance is evolving too, so we're going to be looking at a variety of variables and factors that the CDC is now recommending. Rather than focusing potentially on one specific number, we're going to be looking at the overall picture of supply versus demand and where that is.

**Cristi Moore: We have several viewers asking about the impact of Covid related dementia. Has DHEC compiled any data that speaks to this concern?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We compile data on symptoms, but not necessarily secondary diagnoses such as a Covid-related dementia, so I am not aware necessarily of seeing any patterns in our data for symptoms that might suggest that, but we are not looking specifically at that secondary diagnosis.

**Cristi Moore:** **Stephen, have there been any reports of vaccine doses being wasted or spoiled due to temperature problems?**

**Stephen White:** We've actually seen very minimal wastage or indoor spoilage reported to our VAMS. We attribute a large part of this to the fact that the hospital systems that received the ultra-cold vaccines have the storage capabilities of being able to store those vaccines at those ultra-cold temperatures, that -70 degrees Celsius, so we feel like that is a big contributing factor to why we've seen very little waste. We do see waste, that does occur, it's very typical with any vaccine that you get or that that's given at a provider office. So it's nothing new there as far as if somebody breaks a vial, etc.

**Cristi Moore: Dr. Traxler, do you know what will be the process for the next phase of vaccinations in South Carolina, for instance will there be like an online sign up, drive through, things like that?**

**Dr Traxler:** As we progress through these phases, we know that there's going to be increasing numbers of people in the phases needing to be vaccinated, so we are looking at the operational components that will be involved in administering vaccination to that many people, while especially taking into consideration some of the unique characteristics of some of those groups for vaccination, such as the elderly or those with health conditions. Drive-through is a potential that is being explored, though we are still looking at it in relation to the 15-minute observation period that's needed after receiving the vaccine. We are also looking at a basically a scheduling type system either online or by telephone, or some hybrid thereof. As we get closer to Phase 1B we will be providing more information about the different options for how to arrange to get your vaccine as well as specifically where to go to get your vaccine.

**Cristi Moore: Can healthcare providers order vaccine from the vaccine manufacturer?**

**Dr. Traxler:** No, all of the vaccine at this time is being distributed by the federal government. This isn't just in South Carolina this is across the country. All of the vaccine that's basically allotted for the United States, or is that the United States has access to, is being distributed by the federal government.

**Cristi Moore:** **Stephen this is a two-part question for you. The first part: according to the CDC, South Carolina has been shipped approximately 28 doses per 1,000 people. The average is around 46 per 1000, the median is as well, and this puts South Carolina 51st in the nation out of 50 states. Is South Carolina ordering its full weekly allocation of doses?**

**Stephen White:** As we've mentioned in past briefings the doses that we have received in South Carolina have been ordered against in its entirety, those doses are very limited. The Moderna doses have gone to the long-term care facility partnerships. With our current allocation that we have with Moderna, we anticipate getting those doses out to providers next week to the ones that were onboarding outside of the acute care hospitals, and then the Pfizer doses have been allocated to the acute care hospitals and non-care hospitals as well. We'll be allocating some additional doses next week to some providers out in the community, outside of the hospitals as well that have ultracold storage capabilities.

**Cristi Moore: Dr. Traxler are you aware of any prominent state leaders or government officials who have been vaccinated and are they included in any of the phases?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I am not aware of any state governmental officials or leadership being vaccinated, though certainly if they were in 1A they absolutely would be eligible to go ahead and be vaccinated, and we would encourage it at least for them to schedule their appointment by January 15. Everyone will be in one of the phases including state government leadership, but they will be in phases in general based on their own physical characteristics their age or health conditions or depending on what aspect of leader of leadership or state government they may be in. One of the frontline essential workers or the essential worker category, as I named earlier, some of the other state agencies and the like.

**Cristi Moore: Stephen this is for you- could we give more information on the 14,625 doses received by the DHEC distribution center as compared to the 5,882 doses as of yesterday that have been distributed to hospital sites? Why is such a large number being retained at distribution center?**

**Stephen White:** The DHEC distribution center is routinely sending out doses to smaller sites which can't handle a full order. The minimum ordering quantity is 975 doses from Pfizer, so DHEC is acting on behalf of some of these facilities and on a daily basis these doses are being distributed from that site to those smaller sites in smaller quantities. One, that's more manageable so they can strategically vaccinate individuals that that they're looking to vaccinate within a five-day window. As we bring on additional sites and as smaller sites are being onboarded, DHEC will distribute doses to those sites as well from the distribution center.

**Cristi Moore:** **Dr. Traxler I know you've spoken to this already but should all people await notification that are now eligible for vaccination, or can those who haven't been contacted but believe they are eligible or will soon be eligible due to things such as age, profession, pre-existing condition- should they reach out to health care providers to confirm their status or schedule a vaccination appointment?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Right now the health care workers and those who work in health care settings are strongly encouraged to reach out to their local hospital or as we bring on, as Stephen noted, non-hospital sites in the next week and week or two. We strongly encourage them to make that appointment for their first dose by January 15, even if they have not been contacted, to go ahead and initiate reaching out. However, if you are not a healthcare worker at this time, then there is no need to call a health care provider or hospital. There's no not a signup list, per se, at this time for people in future phases. We will be communicating again the exact specifics of how to sign up for an appointment as we get closer to the next phase starting, so that people will have an opportunity and will not miss that.

**Cristi Moore: I think this is probably going to be our last question- when will the VAC be releasing the finalized guidance for Phase 1B and Phase 1C?**

**Dr. Traxler:** My understanding is, I believe they were meeting again today. They hope to have more information today. My understanding again is that they are in overall agreement with the Phase 1B and 1C categories that the ACIP has put out, but we're looking at some of the detailed aspects of those groups now and again. I anticipate that they'll be getting us more written information to us and recommendations here in the next week

**Cristi Moore:** We'd just like to thank all of our media partners, Dr. Traxler and Stephen White for joining today. I just want to clarify one thing- the list of hospital contacts and the vaccine flow in South Carolina infographic will be updated online this afternoon. I just want to again thank you for joining and until next time stay healthy.