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

**January 13, 2021**

**Cristi Moore (Moderator): I would like to ask for everyone else to please mute your mics so that Dr. Traxler can give us an update on vaccines in South Carolina.**

**Dr. Traxler:** Thank you, good afternoon everyone, as of today there have been 332,990 confirmed and 32,388 probable cases identified in the state. 5,402 South Carolinians have been confirmed to have died from Covid-19, along with 509 probable deaths. There are currently 2,446 Covid-19 patients hospitalized in the state and currently there is an 82.66 bed utilization rate in our hospitals.

Today in South Carolina and across the nation we are facing an unprecedented growth and those who are becoming ill. These increases come as South Carolina is facing new record highs recently reaching 5,070 new cases reported on Friday and a positivity rate of 34.2 percent last week on Thursday.

Many hospitals in the state are canceling elective services to deal with the overwhelming increases in the number of patients, as Covid-19 continues to spread in our community in staggering rates. We're calling on all South Carolinians to take immediate actions to stop the spread of Covid-19 in our communities.

We want South Carolinians to understand that we are all now on the front lines of the fight against Covid-19. Every single one of us is on the front line until the Covid-19 vaccines become more readily available and enough people are vaccinated. We must all act now or continue to face these high numbers of cases that we've not seen before that are overwhelming our hospitals and health care systems, as well as taking the lives of those that we love.

To do this every one of us must recommit- must promise again- to participate in the fight. If we don't act now, we could face many dark months ahead. We're calling on all South Carolinians today right now to activate themselves and help us fight this disease by taking those small steps that make a big difference: wearing your mask, getting tested and staying home when you're sick. Avoiding large gatherings, practicing physical distancing, and when it's your turn getting vaccinated.

Concerning the vaccine, today we open the scheduling for appointments to those who are 70 years of age and older. Providers are scheduling appointments now and their information can be found on our website at scdhc.gov/vaxlocator as people look to schedule their vaccines. The information in this locator map is provided to DHEC with assistance from the South Carolina Hospital Association and other vaccine providers. The status of the facilities on the map can change daily and more locations will be added to the map in the coming days and weeks.

DHEC is also working hard to ensure locations are able to provide the vaccine in both rural and underserved areas, however we want to help set expectations on getting an appointment. It's important to understand that the flow of vaccine is a trickle into our state right now from the federal government. South Carolina receives weekly shipments of vaccines from the federal government typically at the beginning and early parts of the week. Each week we get roughly 60,000 doses for the entire state, yet we estimate there to be about 10 times more people than that who are 70 years old and older in South Carolina. Also, many of the appointments in the close term, the coming weeks, have already been booked by people, other folks, who are in Phase 1A, namely health care providers.

Since receiving the first doses of the vaccine in our state on December 14, we remain very encouraged of the dedication of South Carolinians continuing to do their part to fight against Covid-19 by getting vaccinated.

DHEC Care Line, which can assist in providing the phone numbers for calling locations and scheduling appointments, is expected to continue to experience very high call volume. This morning we had more than 5,000 people calling in to our Care Line at once. Just to put that in perspective, that is just shy of the total number of calls that they handle for us in an average week. The entire week our normal call volume is just larger than that at about 8,000 calls a week. This is good news and it does show that the level of interest of South Carolinians to do their part by getting vaccinated is high. At the same time this overwhelming call volume initially created technical issues with the phone system, which is in the process of being corrected.

We are working to expand the capacity of our Care Line, and as of this morning have contracted with a vendor to double the number of dedicated call center operators to respond to these unprecedented, never seen before call volumes. The total number of dedicated call center team members (will increase) from 30 to 61.

We're currently making flow changes to help fast-track calls coming into the Care Line, and we're coordinating with the South Carolina Emergency Management Division to engage the state's HIPS line, but we want to let people know that right now they should expect extended wait times as we work to assist all those who call our team to get information on where to schedule an appointment.

We ask all South Carolinians to please be patient as we work to make certain that the limited doses of the Covid-19 vaccine that are available in our state are provided first and foremost to the most vulnerable against this deadly virus. The current vaccine allocation information for South Carolina is available at scdhec.gov/vaxfacts, and with that I'll turn it back over to you Cristi for questions.

**Cristi Moore: Thank you Dr. Traxler, the first question we have is how can citizens who do not have internet access schedule an appointment?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Those who do not have internet access can use their telephone to call, as I was just describing. The DHEC Care Line is able to give that same contact information that you can find on the map on our website. We are experiencing the very high wait times right now, but be patient and we're working to decrease those so you can call and get phone numbers for vaccine providers from our Care Line staff.

**Cristi Moore: Is DHEC considering issuing a standing order giving school nurses authorization to administer vaccines, and if not, what are the concerns or obstacles to exploring that option?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I'm not aware of any discussions that have gone on about that, that doesn't mean that they haven't potentially occurred amongst other people. If the schools come to us, then we would begin to explore that that option with them and whether it would be possible at that time.

**Cristi Moore:** Is there an effort to bring on additional staff to manage the Care Line volume, and do you know how long the wait times are?

**Dr. Traxler:** Certainly, so like I said we have doubled, actually slightly more than doubled, our number of call center operators already this morning. Unfortunately, I don't have an estimate for what that will do in terms of time for decreasing the wait time. We are seeing extremely high numbers of calls and so we are doing everything we can to get to everyone as fast as we can, but also to provide all the information that they need when talking to them.

**Cristi Moore: Dr. Traxler will VAMS eventually be irrelevant, at least to providers and residents, and then secondly does all data collected switched to SIMON? If you could also explain what SIMON is, that would be appreciated.**

**Dr. Traxler:** Certainly. We are working to set up a system for appointments which will mean that individuals do not have to go through the VAMS system, however providers of the vaccine will still have to be onboarded onto VAMS and know how to use it because that is where they place their requests for each week's orders. DHEC then puts in the allocations, and we do anticipate right now the data on number of vaccines administered goes from VAMS to SIMON. I would anticipate as we transition from using VAMS for this in the future, that will then go directly into SIMON. SIMON is our statewide immunization registry, so all vaccines that are given in South Carolina must be entered into SIMON according to law.

**Cristi Moore: Will bringing on additional staff at the agency speed up the vaccine rollout?**

**Dr. Traxler:** While we are making every effort to bring on additional staff to make certain that we can overcome any delay, the largest obstacle is still the number of vaccines - particularly the number of first doses that enter the state from the federal government.

**Cristi Moore:** **What is the reason hospitals have been the main vaccine administer administrators in early weeks of vaccine rollout in South Carolina? Is it because only they have the initial capacity to handle the cold-chain infrastructure required of the Pfizer vaccine?**

**Dr. Traxler:** That is one significant component - that the majority of providers, especially early on when plans were initially being made in early December, the majority of providers who did have cold the ultra-cold freezers were hospitals. Particularly the ones who had ultra-cold freezers that had larger volumes. In addition, the initial guidance from the CDC indicated that the first people they were going to recommend for vaccination in Phase 1A were going to be the frontline hospital workers, which would be mainly those in hospitals- particularly areas such as ERs, ICUs. They are the people who are encountering Covid-19 patients every day, and so it made the most sense to put the vaccine where it could be kept the safest and in the ultra-cold freezers, while also being utilized for those initial individuals who were in Phase 1A.

**Cristi Moore: Director Taylor told Senators yesterday that the Moderna shots “can now come back over to the rest of the state” - does that refer to future Moderna shipments, or are doses previously allocated to the long-term care facilities coming back to DHEC for statewide distribution? And if it's the latter, how many of the Moderna doses sent to South Carolina are being reallocated?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Director Taylor was referring to the fact that we have allocated all of the doses that are needed for that long-term care program with the federal pharmacy partnership. We have allocated all the doses that they need to it already, so beginning this week there are Moderna vaccines that are coming to South Carolina to sites other than those long-term care facilities in that program.

**Cristi Moore: This particular paper mentions that they've heard from seniors this morning who complained the soonest available appointment through MUSC is still months away. If DHEC and hospitals don't know what South Carolina's allotment is beyond January as Taylor told senators, then how reliable are those months in the future appointments?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I would have to recommend that you speak to each hospital in terms of their practice for scheduling appointments, and how they determine how many. However, we are hopeful that we will continue with close to, if not roughly the same allocation. Certainly, we'd take even more. But as we go on, without speaking for them, I would imagine that they are basing these appointments in the future assuming a steady rate of vaccine coming in.

**Cristi Moore: Superintendent Spearman has asked that teachers be given a special priority similar to what's being done for those aged 70 and older. Is that under consideration?**

**Dr. Traxler:** South Carolina's Covid-19 Vaccine Advisory Committee makes those recommendations to DHEC in regards to which groups are part of which phase in South Carolina, and at this time they have indicated to us that teachers and school staff, including day care staff and institutes of higher education faculty who are teaching in-person classes. are in 1B. However, we remain in communication if their guidance were to change

**Cristi Moore: Dr. Traxler, how can homebound residents who qualify right now receive the vaccine?**

**Dr. Traxler:** At this time the vaccines are only available by going to a vaccine provider's site, and part of the issue here is the logistical considerations. These are not single dose vials, they are the glass vials. The glass containers contain either five or six, or ten doses depending on if it's Pfizer or Moderna. They also have very specific time frames in which you have to use all the doses in that bottle. For Pfizer it's six hours at room temperature and for Moderna it's 12 hours. At this time the best use, so that there are not any doses wasted, is to administer them at sites where you can have multiple people getting vaccinated. However, that could change as production of the vaccine or future vaccines change and as availability increases.

**Cristi Moore: Dr. Traxler what should people in rural communities who don't have providers offering the vaccine yet do?**

**Dr. Traxler:** One option for those people is, if they're able to, travel to the closest provider that does have vaccine to them and get vaccinated there. The other option is that we are continuing, as I noted, to add sites every week. We are going to be working with a lot of our partners, especially that service the rural and underserved communities. We're going to be working with people such as the Federally Qualified Health Centers which are in many of the rural and underserved areas to help them to become vaccine providers. These are examples of some of the providers that are being brought on in the next couple of weeks, and we will continue to add more and more.

One option would be to travel to the nearest location that did have it, and the other would be to be patient- it is coming soon to their community.

**Cristi Moore: Dr. Traxler have you gotten more information about future shipments following HHS Secretary Azar's announcement yesterday about speeding up distribution and no longer holding on to second doses?**

**Dr. Traxler**: No, we have not been given any indication to expect any different numbers than what we have been provided, which is to expect roughly 60,000 a week for January.

**Cristi Moore: Dr. Traxler, the last question that I'm going to pose today that came in from the media: can you walk us through what's happening with the South Carolina National Guard assisting providers with vaccinations? For example, this reporter heard about a team of medics helping at one location, but other than that hadn't really heard a whole lot. Why aren't more teams being deployed around the state?
Dr. Traxler:** The medics for the National Guard have been invaluable during this whole response. They were trained early, about 30 of them, to perform testing and have been doing the testing at a lot of sites. A lot of the medics have also been deployed to assist hospitals. As we progress into vaccination there have been more medics that have been replaced with other healthcare professionals at some of the testing sites, and are being placed at different vaccine providers to assist there. It's my understanding that even this week and next week there will be National Guard members that start beginning to assist with vaccination for at least a couple of other sites in the state.

**Cristi Moore:** Dr. Traxler I would like to thank you for your time today in sharing this important update with our members of the media, and also answering the questions that the media submitted ahead of time. We thank our media partners and until next time, stay healthy. Thank you.