**DHEC Covid-19 Vaccine Update Briefing Transcript**

**Jan. 15, 2021**

**Cristi Moore (moderator):** Good afternoon and welcome to DHEC’s January 15 media briefing on Covid-19 vaccine in South Carolina. I’m Cristi Moore, DHEC chief communications officer, and I’ll be facilitating today's briefing with Dr. Brannon Traxler, DHEC interim public health director, and Stephen White, DHEC immunizations director. We appreciate the support of our media partners and your dedication to share timely and accurate vaccine information with our fellow South Carolinians. We're going to kick off today's media briefing by having Dr. Traxler provide a general update, then we'll move into our facilitated questions and answers. If there's time I’ll open it up for live Q and A. Before we get started, I would like to remind folks to remain muted, and if you have any questions raise your hand and I will call on you at the end. Dr. Traxler I’ll turn it over to you.

**Dr. Traxler:** Thanks, Cristi. Good afternoon everyone. DHEC recognizes the urgent need to vaccinate as many people in our state as possible to stop the spread of Covid-19 in our communities. As part of this effort the agency continues to work with our partners like the South Carolina Hospital Association and others daily to strengthen the state's vaccine pipeline to ensure that as supplies increase nationwide, our providers in South Carolina are able to get the Covid-19 vaccines into the arms of South Carolinians as quickly as possible.

In the meantime, we want to help set expectations on how soon someone can get an appointment. It's important to understand that the flow of vaccine is from the Federal government and it is not sufficient to meet the growing demands. At this time South Carolina currently receives approximately 63,000 doses of vaccines each week from the federal government, typically at the beginning of each week. One hundred percent of Covid-19 vaccines now available in the state have been or are scheduled to be put into the arms of South Carolinians. We ask all South Carolinians to please be patient as we work to make certain that the limited doses of the Covid-19 vaccines that are available in South Carolina are provided first and foremost to those that are most vulnerable to this deadly disease. If you have already scheduled an appointment to receive your vaccines, we encourage you not to schedule double appointments to also to also allow others to schedule and receive their vaccines as soon as possible.

To strengthen South Carolina's ability to quickly and equitably vaccinate people as vaccine supplies are received from the Federal government, DHEC has worked with many associations to onboard providers across our state. To date DHEC has 177 activated sites, meaning they're currently able to receive vaccines. We have 879 approved sites, meaning they are ready and waiting to be activated as soon as more vaccines become available. 755 organizations signed up to provide the vaccines and this does include some larger pharmacies like CVS and Walgreens, which have multiple sites throughout the state and other independent sites. These places are critical to helping us reach the rural communities.

Additionally, our Federally Qualified Health Centers will begin to receive vaccines next week. They are another critical partner in providing access to our rural and underserved communities.

DHEC continues to request and receive our full allocations of the vaccines from the Federal government. To find a location near you that's accepting appointments, visit the DHEC locator map which is at scdhec.gov/vaxlocator. You can also call DHEC’s Care Line to receive help on how to contact the vaccine providers. That number is 1-855-470-2343. They are available from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., seven days a week.

And for the latest updates on the Covid-19 vaccines in South Carolina go to DHEC’s vaccine website at scdhc.gov/vaxfacts. At this point I will turn it back over to you Cristi for questions.

**Cristi Moore: Thank you Dr. Traxler. The first question we have - I’ve been hearing from viewers that there are reports that some healthcare providers have been throwing out doses of the vaccine because the vial with all the doses has been opened for too long without being administered. Is there any validity to these claims?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We track data on wasted doses. Every dose has to be reported to us that is wasted or discarded because it has gone bad, and we are not seeing any significant numbers of doses being discarded or wasted at this time. We will continue to keep a close eye on that and to remind providers to schedule appointments based on the logistics of these vaccines so that there is no need to waste any.

**Cristi Moore: Are there plans for South Carolina to align itself with recent Federal recommendations to open up the current Phase to include people 65 and up? If so when and if not, why?**

**Dr. Traxler:** At this time we have 100 percent of our doses we've received either already in people's arms or scheduled in the near future to go into people's arms. We also have, as we know from our vaccine providers, many appointments being continuing to be scheduled as well as some facilities. We are hearing of waiting lists and these are just with the Phase 1A people at this time, the healthcare workers as well as the 70 and older population in South Carolina. If we start to receive supply that is exceeding demand more than what we currently are, where the demand is exceeding supply then we will consult with our partners and look to open it up to additional populations.

**Cristi Moore: The vaccine locations map shows only 44 out of 162 locations are currently scheduling appointments for Covid-19 vaccinations- does DHEC have a sense of why this is?**

**Dr. Traxler:** This is because the other locations do not have vaccine currently available to schedule for more appointments. Either what they do have is already allotted, it's already earmarked for people who have appointments here in the next few days, or they just physically are completely out of vaccine at this time.

**Cristi Moore: Has the federal government communicated that it would be scaling up the number of vaccines shipped on the weekly basis, and secondly has it communicated why South Carolina is the lowest ranking state for distribution per capita at this time?**

**Dr. Traxler:** The information on our allocations that we're to receive from the federal government, the communications we have received from them, indicate that we should continue to expect approximately what we're expecting now at least for the very foreseeable future. As to the data, we are in communication with the CDC and Operation Warp Speed to verify that information, that data and those numbers are correct and to understand what is happening and what is going on. We're working closely with our other partners including with the Governor's office and other state officials to help figure that out.

**Cristi Moore: Thank you Dr. Traxler. DHEC has expanded who can get the vaccine in recent days. Did the department underestimate the demand for the vaccine from the original Phase 1A groups, and secondly why were 70 and older patients added into Phase 1A of the rollout plan when there isn't enough vaccine to complete second doses for those frontline workers?**

**Dr. Traxler:** At this time, we understand that we have second doses. When we place our orders from the federal government we place orders separately for first and second doses, and we have the second doses available and are ordering them as providers are requesting them to be used as second doses. In regard to why the decision was made to move on to the 70 and older population, it was that at the time based on the supply and demand picture. There was looking to be more supply that than what was being demanded by the health care workers at that time, and instead the decision was made to go ahead and allow 70 and older to begin scheduling their appointments so that no doses were going to waste and vaccine was not sitting on the shelf and getting into people's arms as quickly as we were receiving it.

**Cristi Moore: How does the state's allocation for the coming week compare to previous weeks, and this is a multi-part question are its weekly allocations increasing at all, and what guidance has South Carolina received from the federal government about the allocations it can expect in the coming weeks and months?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Our allocation for next week is the same this week as it has been for all the weeks thus far. We have been receiving consistent allocations for the Pfizer and the Moderna vaccines since each of them became available. I’m sorry what was the next part?

**Cristi Moore: Do we know what allocations we can expect in the coming weeks and months?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We've been told through January. We've previously been told to expect to receive approximately the same amount that we have been receiving which is that 63,000 total a week. We have not been given estimates beyond that.

**Cristi Moore: Dr. Traxler this is a question that I think you've addressed in your talking points, but large rural patches of the states do not have clinics who are accepting appointments. What is DHEC doing to make the vaccine available outside of the cities?**

**Dr. Traxler:** The Federally Qualified Health Centers, many of which are in rural areas, will receive vaccine beginning the start of this coming week and have been on brought on and allocated vaccine this week. They should be able to start vaccinating in some of those areas. Additionally, vaccines have been allocated to some of the larger retail pharmacies and some of those will begin vaccination clinics in some of the rural areas. We also have worked to open DHEC clinics there, I believe seven DHEC sites have received vaccine, and then maybe an eighth mobile one that should begin vaccinating here in the next couple of weeks. We continue to bring on more of those sites, so we are actively looking for and identifying and onboarding those vaccine providers in those areas to make sure that there is equitable distribution of the vaccines across the state.

**Cristi Moore: This is a two-part question as well. Is South Carolina working to develop a front door portal through which residents can directly register for appointment in VAMS, and if so when would that be launched? And do you think that that would alleviate the issue that people are currently experiencing by needing an email address?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We are working on a front door portal - I like that term - we are working on a statewide appointment system where people could go in and not require the invitation to come from VAMS. I don't have an exact estimate other than in the next couple, few, weeks. As to whether or not that would require them still to have an email address, at this time it is a website-based portal, so they wouldn't need an email address, however we are also exploring options as we recognize that many people in South Carolina don't have email address or access to the internet. We're also exploring other options to tie into this statewide appointment system.

**Cristi Moore: This is a follow-up on that statewide appointment system. Do you know how this would affect people who already made appointments with providers in say February, March and April?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We are working- our IT department is working- with the IT departments for vaccine providers and will continue to do so as we get further along in the process for this, but at this time I do not anticipate that it would cause any difference or that people would experience any change in their vaccine appointments due to the switch over of these systems.

 **Cristi Moore: This question is similar to one you've already answered, but according to the CDC out of all 50 states South Carolina has received the least amount of vaccine per capita. Is it true that the federal government is giving more vaccine doses to states that move through their supply more quickly?**

**Dr. Traxler:** That is not our understanding. Our understanding has been that it is based on population, so as I said we are in communication frequently for the last couple days with the CDC vaccination team and their data team, as well as with Operation Warp Speed, to verify if these data points are correct. And if so, to help understand why this is the case to help manage expectations.

**Cristi Moore: What's the best guidance you can offer people in Phase 1B about when they can expect to start scheduling appointments?**

**Dr. Traxler:** It's very hard to predict this because we don't know what to expect in terms of our allocations beyond January from the federal government. But if we were to continue to receive the same amount as we're receiving now on a weekly basis, I would anticipate that other phases, the next being Phase 1B would begin probably within a couple of months.

**Cristi Moore: What goal or target has DHEC set in terms of the percentage of the Phase 1A and 70 plus population we'd like to have vaccinated before opening up Phase 1B?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Rather than being an exact percentage that we want to see vaccinated, we are looking at again the supply versus demand, so we're looking at the rate at which appointments are being scheduled or are being requested. If appointment scheduling or requests begin to trail off and begin to decrease, and especially when they begin to decrease to the point where that demand is going to become less than the supply, that is when we would look to be moving into the next phase.

**Cristi Moore: Why isn't DHEC able to use facilities like the state fairgrounds that have space for the required observation for community vaccination clinics?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Right now, DHEC is working on various sites, with that being one great example, to develop drive-through clinics at those locations.

**Cristi Moore: Greenville County is deploying the first of three mobile vaccination vans at the end of this month. Are mobile vaccination vans a part of DHEC plan right now, and if so what's the goal in terms of a timetable when you have them ready to roll?**

**Dr. Traxler:** DHEC is working on mobile clinics, I can't promise whether they're necessarily vans or what the site looks like, but we are developing mobile clinics and I expect the first one to be rolling out or going out and providing vaccines here in the next week or so.

**Cristi Moore: Is the main problem supply of the vaccine or not having enough individuals to administer the vaccine as to the reason for the slow roll out of vaccinations?**

**Dr. Traxler:** At this time as I was saying, we are seeing demand exceeding supply and so right now it is not having enough vaccines coming into South Carolina as there are people who can vaccinate and want to be vaccinated.

**Cristi Moore: Yesterday DHEC sent a statement saying the state was moving from containment to mitigation, due to a high viral spread in the state. We know that South Carolinians will need to take extra care to follow Covid protocols, but what does this mean for businesses and municipalities, etc.? Should they be expecting added restrictions or taking additional steps that they haven't already been doing, and what would those additional measures be?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We certainly urge all entities right now, considering the rates of transmission that we are seeing in the communities, to really work to implement those mitigation measures that we know work. We're looking to them and encouraging them to ask people who are visiting their business or in their region to wear a mask. We're looking for people to be reminded of social distancing. We're really calling on a lot of our local and regional leaders in all different industries to help both set the example and take those steps to protect the people of South Carolina.

**Cristi Moore: If DHEC is no longer doing contact tracing, what happens to the hundreds of people at DHEC hired to do that? Do they shift to the vaccine rollout effort, for example, and if so in what capacity or were they simply temporary workers whose job has now ended?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We are still doing contact tracing and every one of those hundreds of people are still doing contact tracing. We have not diverted any of those people to any other task or use nor at this time do we expect to be doing so. At this point there is just so much spread that even with the contact tracers going out and working still you know just as much if not before to advise every case and contact on what is recommended. We realize that the disease activity level, how much virus is out there, it's just so much that the contact tracing alone is not going to help control it. So, it really comes down to communities and people helping take extra actions to protect themselves and others.

**Cristi Moore: This is our last submitted question. Can we get a better explanation about Phase 1B, since Phase 1A has been updated twice now will there be any more updates to Phase 1A?**

**Dr. Traxler:** At this time, depending on what you call it, I don't expect anything for Phase 1A to change. We will continue to progress through groups of people, sub-populations, as identified in these Phases, so I anticipate that the next increase would be Phase 1B and would be likely some of those frontline essential workers, that group as a whole. At this point we are focused on getting everybody vaccinated or getting them a chance to be vaccinated.

**Cristi Moore:** Dr. Traxler I’m going to open it up for questions now and I'd like for Nick over at WPDE to unmute yourself and ask Dr. Traxler a question.

**Nick Papantonis (WPDE): Good afternoon Dr. Traxler, thank you again for taking the time. Your data and estimates have previously kind of shown us that about 50 percent of the original batch of Phase 1A individuals healthcare workers and nursing home have elected to be vaccinated. My question to you- is 50 percent enough to control the pandemic and eventually end the pandemic in South Carolina?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We are going to need more than 50 percent of South Carolinians who are eligible to be vaccinated, meaning right now those over the age of 16, to be vaccinated, combined with other measures that we know help control the spread of the virus, to reach that point where we would consider it herd immunity. For the virus transmission not be sustained in our communities, we would need significantly higher than 50 percent. Thank you for your question, Nick.

**Cristi Moore:** Shawna Adcox, please ask your question.

**Shawna Adcox (Post and Courier): Help me understand how the mass vaccination drive throughs that were announced today by Prisma fit into this scenario if 100 percent is already either used up or appointed?**

**Dr. Traxler:** My understanding is that those are not actually beginning today. Maybe next week. They will be receiving all the vaccinations, providers will be receiving their next shipment of doses, we get them at the start of every week from the federal government. I would imagine, without having spoken to those hospital systems specifically, that they are in their requests and in their allocations and for next week. Taking that into consideration, I do want to remind everybody at this point there is still a limited number of vaccines coming into the state and you know we really appreciate all our partners. We're seeing them being put into arms and so we're just going to continue that mission.

**Cristi Moore:** Morgan Newell did you have a question for Dr. Traxler?

**Morgan Newell (WBTV): Dr. Traxler do you know how DHEC is handling thousands of people saying they're struggling to either get or sign up for a vaccine appointment, or go on to the DHEC Care Line and reach somebody to at least help them figure out where to go to get one?**

 **Dr. Traxler:** Sure. I think I had mentioned this on Wednesday, we have already immediately on Wednesday morning doubled the number of people answering the phones at the Care Line and are continuing to add folks. We also have partnered with the Emergency Management Division and they're helping by activating the PIPS line, so basically increasing the volume of people available to help take these calls and help these individuals in South Carolina get the information they need to request their appointment.

**Cristi Moore:** Judy can you ask your question now?

**Judy: Thank you so much. I just wanted to ask, what is the best explanation for people who are asking about the processes that they're seeing in other states? The specific example is the sign up for vaccine through Publix, you can go on their website, you sign up and you get immediate confirmation of your two appointment dates versus our process of registering, waiting for the CDC email, and then scheduling. What's the best explanation for the difference in the process between us and what they're doing?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I don't know what system that other states that are doing the scheduling through. Individual providers sites are necessarily doing then on the back end in terms of basically all the doses administered, accounting for those and getting the necessary info in for that for the vaccination registries, but the system that we are working to implement will not require that additional step that the CDC system registration system requires. You would not have to wait on an email back, you would go in and go ahead and as you were saying, have your choice of available places and times and would be able to schedule your vaccine at that point.

**Cristi Moore: Madison you have a question?**

**Madison: Thank you Dr. Traxler. I just wanted to ask, can you talk to us a little bit more about just how quickly the appointment availability is being updated on the map? Especially on Wednesday we definitely were seeing kind of conflicting reports from certain hospitals if they actually had vaccine or if they didn't. How rapidly is that being adjusted so people are actually getting accurate information when they're looking at that?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We are working with the hospitals and the hospital association who I have to say have been very helpful in this regard, to update it in as near real time as we can. As soon as hospitals recognize that they are not going to have appointments, we are asking them to contact us or the hospital association and who are then contacting our folks and changing their status on the map. As you know on days like Wednesday, especially where appointments were flying off the shelves, it was it was very rapidly changing so even those near real-time updates were slightly behind at times.

**Cristi Moore: Sam down at the Island Packet, can you go ahead and ask your question please?**

**Sam Ogozalek (Island Packet):** The Washington Post reported earlier today that there's no federal stockpile of second doses waiting to be shipped. Does that change our allocations going forward over the next couple of weeks? Could you walk us through if that affects the state in any way?

**Dr. Traxler:** We are working to get information on that report to verify if it is true, and if so to understand what impact it could have, but at this time we have not been told anything differently about what to be expecting.

**Cristi More:** Vanessa you have a question

**Vanessa: Yes I do. Thank you for the time Dr. Traxler and everybody over at DHEC we appreciate it. I was hoping to see if you could answer a question about your statement yesterday that you put out about the state of hospitals. It's been very concerning to me. How are hospitals across South Carolina doing right now with this Covid surge? Are you anticipating as well like projections that we will continue to see these numbers rise, and are there any resources that you guys are offering up to them at this point to help them deal with the surge? Whether it's assistance with field hospitals or anything like that?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I agree, I think we all are concerned about what is being seen in hospitals, just the amount of disease that's being seen across our state. We want to see this slowing and so everybody is working together at this time. You're asking about what we were helping with- DHEC and South Carolina Emergency Management Division and the National Guard have all been offering resources to hospitals. It has been a joint statewide effort- some of the hospitals have National Guard personnel, medical personnel assisting within them, and we have worked to help them identify if they have staffing needs, help them identify where they can where they can hire staffing. EMD has PPE that they can provide to hospitals, if hospitals were to experience shortages of that. We are monitoring it closely in regard to projections, it's really going to depend on everyone's behavior in South Carolina. We really need everybody- this is a critical point in time- we need everybody to double down on their efforts and mask up when you're out around anyone else. Avoid group gatherings certainly, if you start to feel sick even the slightest bit off stay home, get tested, and certainly continue to wash your hands and maintain that physical distancing if you do have to be around people from other households. That'll make the biggest difference in terms of what the case numbers and the numbers of hospitalized and patients in ICUs and on ventilators. We need to change that trajectory that it's on right now.

**Cristi Moore:** On behalf of Dr. Traxler and the agency I’d like to thank you for your great questions and your time today we will continue this ongoing conversation next week it's 1:31 and this concludes our briefing, thank you.