**DHEC Vaccine Update Media Briefing Transcript**

**Jan. 18, 2021**

**Cristi Moore (moderator):** Good afternoon and welcome to DHEC’s January 18 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 featuring Dr. Brannon Traxler, DHEC interim public health director. We hold these briefings two to three times a week for the purposes of providing timely vaccine updates and answering questions submitted by the media on behalf of the public. We appreciate the media's dedication to share real-time accurate vaccine information with fellow South Carolinians. Today Dr. Traxler will be providing a vaccine update, we'll move into facilitated questions and answer segment if there's time. I'll open it up for live questions and answers and I will call on folks who raise their hands in the Teams meeting. I would ask for everyone to please remain on mute so that we can get a good quality recording. At this time, I’d like to turn it over to Dr. Brannon Traxler for today's update.

**Dr. Traxler:** Thanks Cristi, good afternoon everyone. DHEC is continuing to work with the South Carolina Hospital Association and others to strengthen the state's vaccine pipeline and ensure that when the vaccine supply arrives, vaccine can get into arms of South Carolinians as quickly as possible.

At this time the flow of vaccine from the federal government is just not sufficient to meet the growing demand. States across the country are in need of more vaccine while DHEC continues to request the most doses possible each week from the federal government. Currently 100 percent of Covid-19 vaccines available in our state have either been given or are scheduled to be given. We continue to encourage those in Phase 1A to schedule their vaccine appointments, this will help shots to be given as quickly as possible once we have additional doses of vaccines. In the meantime, we ask everyone to please be patient as we work to make sure that the limited supplies of Covid-19 vaccine that are available in South Carolina are provided first and foremost to those most vulnerable to Covid-19. If you have already scheduled an appointment to re receive your vaccine, we encourage you not to schedule double appointments so to allow others to schedule and receive their vaccines as soon as possible, and please do not forget it is extremely important to get your second dose of vaccine. People should not leave their first dose appointment without knowing how and when you get that second dose.

Again, some key things to keep in mind when you're scheduling your appointments. Make only two appointments- one for your first dose and if possible at that time, one for your second dose. Make the appointment for your second dose at the same place you're receiving your first dose. Make your second dose appointment while you're at your first dose appointment getting that shot. Until more doses are available some appointments may need to be rescheduled for a later date. Vaccine providers will contact individuals directly if they need to reschedule your appointment because they don't have enough vaccine at that moment. And if you must reschedule your appointment remember to cancel that first or initial appointment that you made. To find a vaccine location near you that's accepting appointments, visit our website at scDHEC.gov/vaxlocator. You can also call the DHEC Care Line at 1-855-472-2343 for help from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., seven days a week. And for the latest updates on the Covid-19 vaccine go to scdhec.gov/vaxfacts. Thank you.

**Cristi Moore: Dr. Traxler we're hearing reports from lawmakers and others about wasted vaccine doses, such as after the day is done and some vaccine is left over after scheduled appointments are completed. Is this true, is there a record of this in VAMS, and lastly, how often is this happening and how much vaccine is being wasted?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Of course we do not want a single drop of this vaccine wasted, especially now when it is so very limited in our state and across the country. We have continued to remind vaccine providers how important it is that they use every dose available. Last week we sent another notification to all the enrolled vaccine providers in the state reminding them that it is critical not to let a single dose go to waste. We remind providers that the Pfizer vials are measured to hold five doses, but many contain a sixth and sometimes even seventh dose. Covid-19 vaccine vials hold 10 doses but often have an 11th dose that can be pulled from that same vial. All doses that are fully available from a vial are acceptable to be put into arms as much as possible. There are records of wastage that go into the VAMS system and thus far we have not seen any significant reports of dose-wastage for either vaccine in VAMS, but this is something we carefully monitor so that we could help provide re-education if we were to see it occurring. Particularly if it were to become occurring more frequently.

**Cristi Moore: Can we get an update about what happened at the vaccine clinic at the State Fairgrounds last Friday, we're hearing that people were able to just show up and receive vaccine. Is that true?**

**Dr. Traxler:** While we have seen those news reports about this event, reporting it was occurring in secret, I just wanted to take a moment to clarify for those of you that are on the line this is not the case. The event that was held at the fairgrounds was a pilot clinic intended for by appointment only people in Phase 1A, and specifically it was geared to those Phase 1A first responders. The reason that we didn't publicly advertise it is because it was not open to the general public, it was open only to those Phase 1A individuals who had scheduled appointments to be vaccinated. There were signs up that were directing people where to go and there were hundreds of people at the event. We recognize and are very encouraged by how strong of interest there is of South Carolinians to receive the Covid-19 vaccine and while vaccines are currently very limited across the country, we remain committed to ensuring that as more vaccines are provided to South Carolina, that we are strengthening those pipelines to make it easier and quicker for those who want to be vaccinated to get it. However, that will take time even without publicly noticing. I will say this this, at by appointment events many people began showing up to be vaccinated without appointments as they learned it was going on. Instead of turning them away the clinic organizers began diverting those without appointments into a separate line and my understanding is they were registering to receive vaccines we still had doses available. That's how many 70 and older individuals ended up receiving their shots, even though it was intended for only those first responders who had made appointments. I am happy to say that over 650 people did receive their first dose vaccine at this event. What we did learn from it is that just by word of mouth, people will start showing up even though they don't have appointments scheduled. Even if appointments are supposed to be required for the event, we've learned from this pilot and we will take that those points into consideration and we'll apply them to make logistical changes for how future potential large-scale drive-through vaccine clinics could be held, to ensure there's a smoother process for everyone involved when we get to that point. I do want to note though that we don't expect any large-scale vaccine clinics to be held frequently until more vaccine is available in the state. Right now, there's just not enough vaccine to hold these mass vaccination clinics. I wish that we could be holding one every day in every county, but until there's more vaccine coming into South Carolina we just don't have the doses to be able to do that.

**Cristi Moore: Is DHEC aware of any vaccination sites that have had to cancel appointments because of the expected vaccine reduction, and also, we are hearing some sites had appointments today but are not open in observance of the holiday.**

**Dr. Traxler:** We are aware that some vaccine providers are having to reschedule or push back appointments due to the limited supply of vaccine, not just in South Carolina but across the country. A vaccine provider should contact a person directly if they need to reschedule their appointment. It is important to remember that DHEC can't schedule appointments for you at this time, but vaccine providers who are the actual people giving the shots are who you need to reschedule your appointment with if you get a message that your appointment has been cancelled. I hope that vaccine providers are not scheduling appointments during any days or hours that their vaccine location is not open.

**Cristi Moore: Last week you mentioned that DHEC was working on a front-door program through which residents could more easily schedule vaccine appointments. Is this program going to be managed by DHEC and accessible on the DHEC website? Got a couple follow-up questions here- what is the timeline for it to be launched and then lastly will this program help people who don't have an email address, which seems to be required for scheduling most appointments.**

**Dr. Traxler:** This portal will be a website which will be available through DHEC and the IT side of it will be managed by DHEC, but people can go in and schedule their vaccination appointments directly rather than having to potentially sign up through a portal and then get an email back from CDC VAMS and then schedule their appointment. This will be a more direct and faster route, and I do hope that in the next couple to three weeks we will be seeing this close to, if not being rolled out. And an email address right now will be required if you're going to go online and do it, but we are working on getting also a phone option where people could call and basically be walked through the process by somebody over the phone if they don't have email or internet access.

**Cristi Moore: Are you disappointed with the federal handling of vaccine distribution? What specifically has been frustrating or difficult to navigate for you as a public health official?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I think the most frustrating part has maybe not been so much even the federal handling but just the realities of trying to mass produce on an unprecedented scale and an unprecedented timeline this many doses of vaccine, considering especially that the two that are available right now are a platform that has never been manufactured before, much less on this this type of scale. Both the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines are that MRNA platform and so it certainly is a challenge for the pharmaceutical companies to mass produce and to get production up, and to ensure that the quality is 100 percent, which they are doing for every dose, and then get it out to the states. So I wish that there was a lot more vaccine a lot faster. I wish that we had a dose right now for every single South Carolinian who wanted one, but the reality is that right now we are only getting the same amount that we've been getting weekly since vaccine rollout began. We have not been told to expect anything differently for the for the foreseeable future.

**Cristi Moore: How many people are now answering phone calls at the DHEC vaccine Care Line?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We have doubled our number of Care Line phone agents from 30 to just over 60, and we also have the spillover assistance going now with the calls routing to the Emergency Management Division's PIPS line. We're very grateful for EMD and the PIPS line phone agents for helping out. The PIPS line agents have all the exact same information and provide all the exact same services that the Care Line phone operators do. I will say that we are getting about 24,000 calls on average a day inbound between the Care Line and PIPS line, though this does go down some on the weekends. Nevertheless, as you can imagine an average of 24,000 is significantly higher than even what is normally encountered in a week. The Care Line is continuing to operate 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., seven days a week.

**Cristi Moore: I was wondering if Dr. Traxler could talk about whether there is a difference between the first dose of the vaccine and the second dose- are they chemically different or is the second dose exactly the same?**

**Dr. Traxler:** They are exactly the same in terms of the chemical makeup and such, but what they do and their function is a little bit different. The first dose gets into your body and primes your immune system, so it gets it ready and gets it started making antibodies and producing that immune response. Then the second dose, which again in the syringe is identical, is a booster. Then it boosts your immune system's response to more significantly produce antibodies and produce that response.

**Cristi Moore: Can South Carolinians trust that the data in the daily updates is accurate now that the problem with South Carolina's vendor that we had last week has been fixed?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Yes, we know now that the system is fully operational and working as it should. This system that we use as our database has been serviced by the same vendor for several years since 2016. We have a great relationship with the vendor. It is unfortunate when there are system errors like what happened last week that occur, but we work closely with the vendor then. And like I said we have a great relationship with this one to fix the problem as soon as possible, and it's also important to remember that as we pointed out I believe in a news release last weekend, no data was lost, no data was breached, nothing was accidentally put into the wrong hands. There just were delays in how the electronic lab reports were being processed inside the database. And as you all hopefully saw on Saturday, we provided then a historic breakdown of the cases for the days where we've had this data database error occurring. Again, it's unfortunate when these types of technical issues occur, but I wanted to remind everybody that having a few days of slightly delayed case counts it did not affect any of our recommended public health actions.

**Cristi Moore: South Carolina is testing at its highest rate since the pandemic began. Can you speak as to how that extra data has helped shape your decisions?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Certainly. The more people that are getting tested, the more accurate of a picture we basically have in terms of how many people are really sick in South Carolina, or I should say are really infected with the Covid-19 virus. Because so many, up to a half, of all Covid-19 infections are asymptomatic. Meaning they don't have symptoms. Testing is the only way to identify that half of cases and then to take actions to prevent them from spreading it on to others. Knowing more about all of the cases can help us guide people individually. By asking them to isolate and then doing their contact tracing and asking their contacts to their close contacts to quarantine in addition, it gives us more data we can have a more accurate representation of how much the virus really is spreading out there in our communities.

**Cristi Moore: Access to the Covid-19 rapid test seems to be limited across the state and not used at DHEC testing sites- can you speak to why that is?**

**Dr. Traxler:** The rapid tests that are available, from what I understand with one exception, are all antigen tests. Meaning they look for a protein on the virus’s surface and those can be done rapidly now in as few as 15 minutes. The other tests go to the lab and are the PCR, and those are those confirmatory viral tests. They have to go to a sophisticated lab that has very large machinery and takes hours to run, but those are the gold standard. Those PCR tests are the most accurate. The rapid tests are more accurate on somebody who has symptoms. Basically their accuracy when used in people who are symptomatic depend on the exact test, but also again depending on the exact test their accuracy may drop and you may have more false positives or false negatives, or both, in people who are asymptomatic. Really it is more accurate to get the PCR test. You can feel more assured by that test result or confident in that test result, and so that's really what we encourage more people to do. Unless they're in a situation, such as around a lot of people where there might be a benefit to doing a rapid test on somebody with symptoms to identify quickly who they are if they're positive and isolate them away from everyone else.

**Cristi Moore: With Prisma opening up its drive-through sites today, where does DHEC stand on turning its testing sites to vaccination sites?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We don't have plans for anywhere in the near future to turn our testing sites into vaccination sites, particularly given the high case counts and especially the high percent positivity that we're seeing throughout the state. There is still is a lot of disease out there and we need to combat that really in a two-pronged approach. Number one is vaccinating as many people as fast as we can and the other one is you know still doing those same things that we've been doing since gosh, a year ago almost, that we know slow the spread of the virus. The preventive measures like masking and physical distancing and then the measures to identify people who are positive through testing and then isolation and quarantine. So testing is still an extremely part important part of our disease control plan here in South Carolina at this time. So in addition there we still have a limited number of vaccines as I've noted coming into the state, so you know as the vaccine supply increases we will be looking to stand up more both external partner and DHEC vaccine sites.

**Cristi Moore: Should someone 65 and older still sign up to get the vaccine if they have a serious allergy?**

**Dr. Traxler:** First of all, I just want to clarify the vaccine is not currently available in South Carolina to those 65 and older unless they are admitted to a hospital and then their attending medical provider determines that they should receive the vaccine which would include knowing that they don't have Covid-19 and they haven't been diagnosed with Covid-19 while there. We do advise anyone with a history of allergic reactions to vaccines to discuss that with their health care provider and it is currently recommended that all vaccine providers monitor patients for at least 15 minutes after they receive their shot, even if they don't have a history of any allergic reaction, because that's the time frame when most serious allergic reactions would occur

**Cristi Moore: If someone is participating in the Astrazeneca vaccine trial and they are unsure if they're receiving the vaccine or a placebo, should they sign up to receive a vaccine? Related to this question does this person qualify for Phase 1A?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I would recommend certainly not, unless they choose to do two things and that would be number one withdrawal from the clinical trial and number two discuss it with their health care provider, who may have additional recommendations and thoughts depending on the person's risk, what their status is with testing, etc. But I encourage people who are participating in the clinical trials to continue to participate in them and to see them out to the end. We are here today with two authorized vaccines for Covid-19, just a year out from this first appearing in our country, due to number one- the amazing ability of the scientists to develop it and number two - the tens of thousands of people not just in our country but also in the world who were willing to participate in clinical trials and help prove the safety and efficacy of these vaccines, so I send my appreciation to them.

**Cristi Moore: Dr. Traxler I know you hit on this in your update today, but I think it bears repeating. This question says, first, that they've been told by some people that they are double booking a vaccine appointment to ensure that they get one. Is this practice discouraged?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Yes. Please, please, please do not double book appointments. We encourage everyone to go in and book. The only time you should book more than one appointment is if you're booking your first and your second dose ones at the same time, and in that case we do encourage it but please do not schedule more than one appointment for either dose because that is taking away an appointment for someone who could be trying to sign up to get it. We ask that everyone sign up and then if you absolutely must for whatever reason reschedule, please be sure that you go in and cancel that initial appointment that you booked as quickly as you can after scheduling your second one.

**Cristi Moore: There are people not getting any appointments until April and May, will this slow the timeline for the next Phases?**

**Dr. Traxler:** This will be dependent again on the flow of vaccine coming into South Carolina. We know that we have been told that we should not expect a change for foreseeable future, at least through January we should count on getting roughly the same number of doses of vaccines each week. And potentially for longer. How long it will take for people in any Phase to get an appointment will be dependent then on how quickly our supply increases, our supply that we're receiving from the federal government and how much it increases. Certainly I would imagine that if it increases very significantly those people a lot sooner than April and May, those people who made those appointments, we would hope would be able to given be given an opportunity to schedule sooner once there are more doses available.

**Cristi Moore:** Thank you Dr. Traxler we've got a few moments now for some live Q and A. So Chris Joseph over at WIS, can you ask your question please?

**Chris Joseph (WIS): Hey doctor thanks for the time. Last week you talked about rural clinics and how that was going to get going, can you give us an update on where that stands?**

**Dr. Traxler:** My understanding is that many of the Federally Qualified Health Centers in South Carolina are receiving vaccines at the early part of this week. Once they vaccinate for their staff, which many of them may already be vaccinated from other locations, they will begin vaccinating those who are in Phase 1A and we'll have those located on our vax locator map. So as soon as they have vaccines and our scheduling appointments they will be showing up on that map.

**Cristi Moore:** Nick over at WPDE, please unmute your mic and ask your question.

**Nick Papantonis (WPDE): Good afternoon Dr. Traxler, thank you again for your time. I just wanted to know if you had an update from Friday with all the news of South Carolina according to the CDC being the last in the nation in terms of vaccine distribution?**

**Dr. Traxler:** That issue been discovered, yes, so we are remaining in conversation with Operation Warp Speed and the CDC, and have been throughout the weekend as well. I think hopefully we will soon have an answer or an explanation from these partners at the federal level to be able to share with everyone at this moment, I don't have an update.

**Cristi Moore:** Morgan can you ask your question please?

**Morgan Newell:** I’m sorry, that was pretty much my question so thank you. I forgot to take my hand down.

**Cristi Moore:** Okay Sam, did you have a question for Dr. Traxler?

**Sam Ogozalek (Island Packet): Yeah thanks Cristi, hey Dr. Traxler, could you maybe give us an overview of where the state's outbreak stands right now what are you guys seeing on the ground? Is it primarily household infections, workplace infections, what's driving the outbreak right now and what's your outlook for the next couple of weeks on where we might stand by mid-February or so?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We are still seeing very high levels of the virus being transmitted, really just in the communities overall. We are still seeing very high levels of transmission in households, we see some outside of households, though I will say that (they are) more common than workplace outbreaks or clusters. We are seeing not as many as we did before the holidays, but we are seeing basically clusters associated with social events, but again it's significantly a household and then friends and family contacts where we're seeing it. And certainly, as we get through the winter, we want to encourage everyone to remain diligent to continue mask wearing anytime you're with people outside your household, to keep your physical distancing if you feel sick at all. Even a runny nose or just even more tired than usual, please stay home and away from people other than to go get tested. And of course, good hand hygiene, because this is not only Covid-19, but we are headed towards what's often the peak of South Carolina's flu season and many other cold and flu viruses. Like at any other time I hope that we are going to see cases continue to improve, I hope that we can always make a sharp downward turn but that's going to depend on each person out in our community doing what they need to do.

**Cristi Moore:** I want to thank you Dr. Traxler I know we've got more hands raised but we are out of time for today on behalf of Dr. Traxler and DHEC, I'd like to thank you for your great questions and your time. We will continue this ongoing conversation later this week, more than likely on Wednesday and this does conclude today's briefing. Thank you all very much for your time.