**DHEC Vaccine Update Transcript**

**Dec. 31, 2020**

**Laura Renwick:** Hi everyone, Laura with DHEC, just wanted to give a quick reminder to please go ahead and make sure your phones and your computer stay muted so everyone can get a nice clear recording.

We have about 30 minutes today so I’m going to be brief. We have Dr. Brannon Traxler, our interim public health director on the call today as well as Stephen White, our immunizations director.

Lots of great vaccine news this week, we've sent a couple updates and then I’m sure you all received a pretty lengthy news release that provides additional information a short bit before this meeting was pulled together. I’m going to go ahead and turn it over to Dr. Traxler for an additional update, and then I appreciate y'all sent over some great questions a lot of you sent the same question so I’ll address as much as we can in the time that we have before 2:30. I’ll try to mute myself if you all can do the same on your end, I will turn it over to Dr. Traxler.

**Dr. Traxler:** Thanks Laura, and good afternoon everyone. Happy almost New Year, I know everyone is excited to see 2021 arriving. As of today there have been 307,507 confirmed and probable cases identified in the state. There have been 5,296 South Carolinians that have died from Covid-19 and 2,025 Covid-19 patients are hospitalized in the state as of today.

We recognize that a lot of South Carolinians have questions about the Covid-19 vaccines, including when and where you'll be able to get them vaccinated. Since receiving those first doses of the vaccine in the state on December 14th, we really remain encouraged by the dedication of South Carolinians and continuing to do their part in this pandemic by getting vaccinated. As of this morning 39,100 doses of Covid-19 vaccines have been administered in South Carolina, with more vaccines continuing to be administered every day. Our ultimate goal is to save lives. DHEC is dedicated to working with our partners to ensure that everyone who wishes to be immunized against Covid-19 in the state will be vaccinated, but it is going to take some time.

It's important to recognize this is a rapidly evolving event. The vaccine is unlike any vaccine that we've ever dealt with before we must remain flexible in our response so that we can continue to respond to the global and local challenges as they arise South Carolina like other states has faced several challenges due to the unique requirements of the mass distribution of the Covid-19 vaccine challenges today include of course the limited supplies of vaccine during the phased rollout complex logistics such as planning for the arrival of the Pfizer-Biontec vaccine which is the first authorized vaccine in history that must be stored at these ultra cold present temperatures requiring locations who receive it to have those specialized ultra cold freezers with temperature monitoring capabilities and data loggers in place. And while these logistical challenges make distribution of the vaccine complicated, DHEC and our partners did identify storage opportunities and expand capacity starting months ago.

In addition we must continue to rapidly adapt to changes in the federal and other guidance. This includes quickly adjusting our planning efforts to recent federal guidance regarding the populations to be vaccinated. That guidance from the that federal guidance changed just as those initial vaccine distributions were being sent to the states, literally the same days that those first shipments were headed our way, so this resulted in a significant increase in the population that is included in phase 1A. To quickly address these changes in the guidance, South Carolina like other states, acted immediately to edit some of the plans and protocols that were in place for the in-state distribution, and that same assessment and changes then had to be made at the local level as hospitals and distribution sites began to receive shipments and vaccinate their employees. The sites are now actively vaccinating per the state and federal guidelines as aggressively as possible.

We anticipate additional challenges to evolve over the course in the next months. We are confident that with the collaborative problem solving and support of our partners we will meet each new challenge head on.

Work continues at the large vaccination sites across the state with plans to begin distribution to smaller facilities in the next week. The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization and Practices, ACIP, has provided guidance for categories of individuals to include be included in phases 1A, 1B and now 1C.

South Carolina is currently in Phase 1A and is vaccinating individuals in that phase per the South Carolina Covid-19 Vaccine Advisory Committee's recommendations, which are based off of that ACIP guidance. That committee is currently working to translate the national Phase 1B and Phase 1C recommendations to action in South Carolina.

As vaccine supply increases, those vaccination recommendations will expand to include more groups in phases 2 and possibly 3.

I’m getting ready to give you an outline that kind of gives an overview of the estimated time frames for each phase. In early winter vaccinations for Phase 1A are anticipated to continue through February of 2021, then in late winter to early spring based on the current CDC guidance the state will move into phase 1B once 70 percent of South Carolinians identified in Phase 1A have been vaccinated.

In the spring to summer and beyond, Phase 2 is anticipated to begin, with the vaccines expected to become available for the general public during the summer and fall. Everyone in our state who wants to be vaccinated will get their turn, in the meantime we commit to keeping everyone informed of the progress being made in this phased approach for administering the vaccines and we'll let people know when and where they can receive it.

We call on South Carolinians to step up by stepping back until it is their turn in the plan, and to continue to stand together to fight this disease by taking those small steps that make big differences: wearing your mask anytime you're around people outside your household, getting tested and staying home when you're sick, avoiding gatherings with multiple households, and practicing social distancing. With that I will end, thank you very much and I’ll turn it back over to you Laura.

**Laura Renwick: Thanks Dr. Traxler. The first question in the time we have, is several folks have been wanting to know is DHEC happy with the number of phase 1A workers that have been vaccinated in the state? So far you said with the number of Phase 1A workers that have been vaccinated so nearly 40,000 people have received their vaccine in just a little over two weeks and that has included that two-week time period included the Christmas holiday.**

**Dr. Traxler:** Right now South Carolina is ahead of the national rate and is either ahead or on par with most other states. As far as the number of doses administered when compared to the doses received, the hospitals continue to make progress with administering vaccines to Phase 1A employees every day, and we expect that number to continue to increase. Individual hospitals may be able to provide more specific details among about the vaccination uptake among their healthcare workers, but overall we are encouraged by, again, the desire for people to be vaccinated and we promise to get everyone vaccinated.

**Laura Renwick: Thanks Dr. Traxler, another question we kind of addressed in an update earlier this week, what information do we have about the nursing homes and long-term care facility residents and staff that are able to be vaccinated through the federal program?**

**Dr. Traxler:** That, I believe went live this week. Stephen are you on, do you want to address that one?

Stephen White: I can address that. The CVS and Walgreens partners, they did start on the 28th. This is a federal partnership that's run through the CDC, doses were allocated to the state from the state to the CDC partnership for CVS and Walgreens to administer. As I mentioned we know that CVS and Walgreens have already been reaching out and beginning clinics that started this week. We anticipate that by next week, we hope to be able to actually see the doses that that have been administered, so there's those doses that get administered into a federal platform. We will have the ability to observe and see how many doses, and where those doses have been administered, and we're hoping to see that as soon as next week.

**Laura Renwick: Thanks Stephen. Another question, as we advance to additional phases, how will individuals be able to know when it's their turn to get vaccinated?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I certainly think for that one, the biggest message is that in terms of where we are in each phase and where people fall in phases, we're going to continue providing that information on our website and through very valuable media partners of all different types. We will get it out there far and wide in terms of which phase we're in, and which groups are in which phase. We, as you know put out just a little while ago some outlines for who are in what phases, and those will be getting more and more detailed beyond 1A as we as we get closer to them. Also, when people are eligible they will be getting a registration link, basically, from the Vaccine Administration Management System, VAMS and those invitations will come from different clinic sites. But people will know to sign up for the clinic sites and such via information we'll put out on our website and via the media.

**Laura Renwick: Thanks Dr. Traxler. Another question we've been getting, has the vaccine distribution been fairly smooth so far? Has South Carolina seen any major issues as far as transportation or logistics that have complicated the rollout?**

**Dr. Traxler:** There have been those logistical considerations to address, as I was mentioning, some of the unique attributes of this vaccine and such, but I’m not aware of any transportation issues or any significant in the moment logistical problems with administering. I’m not aware of any adverse effects, you know, significant adverse events related to vaccine.

**Laura Renwick: Thanks Dr. Traxler, that was my next question and just to be clear that was the question we're not aware of any individual who's experienced adverse effects in the state?**

**Dr. Traxler:** As of today, as of right now, no we have not been notified of any but certainly we encourage the vaccinators, which they are required to do, to report into the various computer systems which will notify us if that were to happen.

**Laura Renwick: Thanks Dr. Traxler. Another question, for more than a month now since back in November, we expected the state to receive between 200,000 and 300,000 doses by the end of the year. Where are we at and are we pleased with the amount we've received here?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Now that we're at the end of the year, Stephen I think you have that information.

**Stephen White:** There was a little over 200,000 doses that we've received thus far in the state, a little over a hundred thousand actually went to the CVS Walgreens partnership for the long-term care facilities, and that was the Moderna product that we've mentioned in the past. In total for first doses, little over 200,000 doses. We'd love to have received more, which would allow us to be able to vaccinate more providers. We continue to monitor those allocations on a weekly basis.

**Laura Renwick: Probably another question for you Stephen, can you give us an update on the number of providers how many are enrolled and activated?**

**Stephen White:** I took a look at that number a little bit earlier this morning and there's 675 approved providers in the state, which means that they have successfully enrolled in the Covid-19 program in South Carolina that's required by CDC. Now to be clear, being approved for enrollment does not mean that you will automatically receive vaccines. It means that we have what we need and when we have an allocation we can then activate those sites to receive vaccines at the time when we have vaccine to allocate to those sites.

**Laura Renwick: When it's time to advance to Phase 1B, will that happen at a facility by facility basis or will that happen across the entire state at once?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I don't anticipate that it will be on a facility by facility basis. We are going to want to try to keep this the same across the state certainly as much as we can, and so I anticipate it would be across the state

**Laura Renwick: Do we anticipate that teachers school staff and students could be if vaccine is approved for children, I mean before the start of the 2021-2022 school year.**

**Dr. Traxler:** That's a great question so and you pointed out if the vaccines are approved for children- because right now the vaccines are just now undergoing clinical trials in children, so we don't have the data to know whether these vaccines are indicated for children yet.

The Pfizer-Biontec product goes down in syndication, down to age 16, and the Moderna down to age 18. Whether there are going to be recommendations for pediatrics, for children, before the next school year just remains to be seen based on what goes on with the clinical trials in terms of teachers and other school staff. I would certainly anticipate that they would have had an opportunity if they so choose to get vaccinated by the start of next school year. The ACIP has put them I think in Phase 1B and so the Vaccine Advisory Committee, as I said is reviewing those recommendations for 1B and 1C. I would expect that next week we will have their guidance in terms of how to apply that to South Carolina, but regardless of whether that phase changes I definitely expect that they will have had an opportunity by next school year if they want it.

**Laura Renwick: Thanks Dr. Traxler. Another question we received is if we can just kind of provide a general overview about how the process of how any state requests, receives and is assigned vaccine from the federal government? Can you kind of outline just what that process looks like?**

**Dr. Traxler:** That's a Stephen question, but sure.

**Stephen White:** Sure I can handle that question. We are allocated doses on a on a weekly basis, and so we are told to plan on a specific number which we anticipate that we will get. We have seen changes in our allocations throughout this entire process, and planning from the start up until the day that we actually get it we've seen we've seen changes so we hope to be pleasantly surprised when our allocations are higher than what we plan for. But at the moment we find out what allocations we are going to get on a weekly basis and we get notified of that through federal systems and they usually give us just a day or two before we get our allocations to us.

**Laura Renwick: Thanks Stephen. Another question we had, is there an update on DHEC adding regularly updated vaccine numbers and data sets on the website?**

**Stephen White:** We've been having discussions on how we can get some information out onto the website from the doses that have been allocated to the state, the doses that have been distributed from what we've been allocated, and then of course the number of doses that have been administered in the state as well. We anticipate that as we continue to move along and move forward with this response with the vaccine allocations that we'll have other data report reporting elements that we can help share to provide information to the general public as well, so we hope that those will be coming soon on the DHEC website in the coming couple of weeks.

**Laura Renwick: Thanks Stephen, another question and this might just be more for clarity, so is the process that DHEC receives vaccine and then distributes to hospitals, or hospitals receiving their doses directly?**

**Dr. Traxler:** For the majority of hospitals, they're receiving these via direct shipment, so as Stephen said when we receive that allocation DHEC is then allocating numbers and the federal government is then sending it directly, drop shipping it, to these hospitals or larger entities. Then there are some sites that DHEC is receiving it and then sending out maybe portions of a tray of vaccines to some of these hospitals. The Pfizer product comes in a tray of 975 doses, so as you can imagine not every facility or entity needs that many doses especially if they don't have the ultra cold storage. They need to use it within that five-day window and so for those we were receiving and storing and then dividing it out to send how many are needed to the smaller entities.

**Laura Renwick: Thanks Dr. Traxler. Can you speak to the additional amount of vaccine that's been provided in the vials, are we continuing to see that we can get more doses out of the vials?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We are, for the Pfizer-Biontec vaccine, we are continuing to get routinely from what i understand six, occasionally seven doses out of a vial. That is certainly very good news to have those bonus doses. I have not been made aware, because the Moderna product thus far is being used in the state by the pharmacies for that partnership with long-term care facilities, I can't speak to whether there have been extra doses bonus doses in the Moderna vials or not.

**Laura Renwick : I think this was addressed in the news release we sent just a short bit ago, but is there any anticipation of when we'll be able to advance to 1B?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We're estimating that that will be later in February, but the trigger that we'll be looking more for is when 70 of that Phase 1A population has had the chance to be vaccinated.

**Laura Renwick: Thanks Dr. Traxler. Do we expect to see our weekly allotments increase in the coming weeks as vaccine becomes more available? Stephen do you want to take that one?**

**Stephen White:** What we've been what we've been told thus far is that we should anticipate through January that our allotments we get on a weekly basis will likely remain the same for what we've received thus far. We don't have any further knowledge on what that will look like after January, and we also don't know if those doses, talking about the allocation changes that we've seen, we could potentially see more. We have been told by Operation Warp Speed and CDC to plan for the vaccines that we've received on a weekly basis. As of yet I will say that we will expect before January is up to have Moderna vaccine, probably in the next couple weeks, that can be available to be used for other Phase 1A outside of long-term care facility.

**Dr. Traxler: The first couple of weeks the allocation was all going to the long-term care facilities, but then after that it should be coming into the other pool to be used statewide.**

**Stephen White:** Correct, yes. That is correct and we are we are looking at ways in which we can utilize the direct ship method for the Moderna product because it does come in smaller quantities of 100 doses, so that has less logistical considerations to get vaccines directly to the site, which is the preferred method rather than doing any kind of hub and spoke or redistribution model.

It also does not require the ultra cold frozen temperature, it requires just standard freezer temp so it can it can be maintained in freezer temps for the shelf life of, I don't actually believe it has the expiration date but it can also be kept in refrigerated temperatures for 30 days, which is certainly something that most vaccination providers are used to storing vaccines and either refrigerated or freezer. We are really excited about increased allocations that we will hopefully end up getting from Moderna now that we our allocations are finished with the CDC partnership and we can start looking to direct to those sites, and it'll be more stable and logistically easier to manage.

**Laura Renwick:** **Another question we received is how are those Phase 1A individuals who aren't employed at a healthcare facility, how are they receiving their vaccine since they don't work at a hospital?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We're working on a number of different methods for those individuals to get the vaccine. Some of them have received it from their local hospitals, but for others we are working on a way for the ones who want to be vaccinated to sign up, and then we are establishing various different methods throughout the state. Anything from private offices who are willing to help vaccinate other Phase 1A workers to DHEC sites. We'll be getting all of that set up statewide in the next couple weeks and then those who have signed up will be notified of the closest clinic or site where they could register to be vaccinated. And that'll be forthcoming, the ability to sign up, later next week.

**Laura Renwick: Dr. Traxler are first responders and EMS firefighters considered part of 1A and do we have insight on them receiving vaccine already?**

**Dr. Traxler:** EMS absolutely are Phase 1A and the firefighters that are also dual certified as EMTs or paramedics who are providing that emergency medical care also fall into 1A, just like with outside providers in the community. Some of them have been vaccinated by their local health care systems and then others will be able to sign up and go to these various sites that we're setting up, similar to other health care providers.

**Laura Renwick: For those of us who are waiting to get the vaccine, what are the things we can be doing in the interim?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We all need to continue, especially the during these winter months where we're seeing these really high case counts saddening numbers of deaths, we really all need to be doubling down on our efforts to prevent the spread of the virus. That's those things that we've been talking about for months that seem so basic, but really are so essential and so useful, and that's the physical distancing at least six feet, avoiding gathering with folks outside your household, if you do have to outdoors is certainly preferable then to indoors, and then mask wearing anytime you're around people outside your household or in public. And good hand hygiene of course, and it's also flu season it's not too late however to get your flu shot so I'd recommend that if you haven't gotten it for this year yet.

**Laura Renwick: Thanks Dr. Traxler and another question that might be for Stephen, but how is the state monitoring who's receiving vaccine and that the appropriate phase 1A individuals are being vaccinated?**

**Stephen White:** I can take that question. We have been providing the vaccines to the health care providers in the hospital settings, and as Dr. Traxler has mentioned those have been going outside, and so you know there's been a bit of discretion too on the hospital level for who they feel is important to keep their operations running at their hospitals and part of the Vaccine Advisory Committee when they were putting out their recommendations for Phase 1A is that they didn't want to be prescriptive, because not all hospitals had the same requirements to keep their hospital doors open at each site. So what what's important in one county hospital versus another county hospital, there could be some differences, so the discretion has come at the hospital level on who they are going to vaccinate. But the guidance remains the same for all hospitals that frontline healthcare workers and healthcare workers in general are the ones that should be getting the vaccines first. We do have a way of seeing who has received their vaccines through our VAMS system that Dr. Traxler has mentioned, which is where at the federal system that providers will enter their doses into that system which translates to our state immunization registry. So we have the ability to see who has been vaccinated through those mechanisms as well.

**Laura Renwick: Thanks Stephen. I have just one more question: how are we working to ensure that our small and rural healthcare facilities, those front line workers, have just as much opportunity to receive vaccine as some of our bigger hospitals in the state?**

**Dr. Traxler:** For that, that's where we're working with, as I said, some are independent private practices that are willing to help us vaccinate in their communities, which we hugely appreciate that wonderful partnership. We're working with other health care provider offices as well as we're working to be setting up some DHEC vaccination clinics, and one of the things that we are looking at is making sure that there's access throughout the state, including in the rural and underserved areas.

**Laura Renwick: Thanks Dr. Traxler, that was the last question I had from the pool that we received i know that you're hopping from this and do a 2 30 meeting so I’ll go ahead and just ask if you or Stephen have any final thoughts that you'd like to message out and then we'll wrap up for the day?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I just hope that everyone has a very happy and safe New Years.

**Laura Renwick:** Thank you Dr. Traxler. All right thank you both it's been a heck of a year, so we appreciate you both, we appreciate everyone on the line since there's so much information happening and it's changing so quickly. We are going to plan to hold more of these more frequently so that we can make sure that the most accurate information is getting provided. As we anticipated there wasn't a whole lot of information at first and now it's just like the dams have broken and it's changing frequently, so we will work to hold more of these tele briefings and to help make sure that we're answering your questions and getting the public the information they need, so thanks everyone have a good New Years, please stay home. Thanks everyone!