**DHEC COVID-19 Vaccine Update Transcript**

**Jan. 8, 2021**

**Cristi Moore:** Hi everyone, I’m going to be facilitating today's media briefing on Covid-19 vaccine in South Carolina with Dr. Brannon Traxler, DHEC interim public health director. We'd like to thank you for joining us and submitting your questions ahead of time. Dr. Traxler is going to provide a Covid-19 vaccine update, and then we'll get to as many questions as you have submitted. Dr. Traxler I'll turn it over to you for the update.

**Dr. Traxler:** Thanks Cristi, and good afternoon everyone. We have a lot of new information to provide today but first I want to give a brief overview of today's numbers. Today we announced over 5,000 cases for the first time - that is 5,077 new cases, 4,986 confirmed and 91 probable. This is the highest number of daily cases that we've reported thus far in South Carolina. Our total performed tests to date is just shy of four million at 3,948,383 tests.

Today we also sadly are announcing the loss of another 34 South Carolinians to Covid-19. This brings our statewide total of deaths from this disease 5,695. I understand that the talk of the hour is vaccines, but I feel compelled to take time today to reiterate that people are continuing to die from Covid-19. Every day people are sick, people are hospitalized, and people are suffering and dying from this virus. As we speak our hospitals are overwhelmed. We appreciate all of the current and factual information that you, our media partners, have been providing to your audiences and thank you for all that you do to keep the people of our state updated.

We also encourage you to help us keep reminding everyone that just because vaccines are here that doesn't make masks, physical distancing, and limiting contact with others outside your household any less important. People will continue to become sick and lose their lives to this virus until enough vaccine is available for all of us, so please, everyone needs to continue to abide by the disease prevention methods that we know work in stopping the spread of this virus.

As a vaccine update, South Carolina has received a total of 146,500 doses of Pfizer vaccine. 69,057 first and second doses have been administered and roughly 83,844 appointments are scheduled for Phase 1A individuals to receive their shots. We've seen a significant increase in the number of Phase 1A individuals getting their vaccine since we started urging them to sign up for an appointment by January 15th.

We also have new information today to provide in regard to the Moderna vaccine. As of today, South Carolina has received 86,400 doses of Moderna vaccine. Currently all of that that has been received by South Carolina is dedicated to vaccinating our state's long-term care facility residents and staff. This is occurring through the CDC's long-term care program, which is that federal partnership with Walgreens and CVS pharmacies. These pharmacies are holding vaccination clinics at every long-term care facility in South Carolina, ensuring that the most vulnerable to Covid-19 and the workers that care for them are prioritized for the Covid-19 vaccine.

CVS and Walgreens began holding vaccine clinics at these facilities the week of December 28 and will continue to hold them until every facility's residents and staff who want to receive the vaccine do so for both doses.

You may remember that the Moderna vaccine requires two doses, similar to the Pfizer vaccine, however the Moderna vaccine second dose should be administered 28 days after the first dose whereas the Pfizer is 21 days between doses. States do have a limited role in this federal long-term care program other than providing the doses of vaccines from our federal allocation the data and information for this program is are recorded in a federal database called Tiberius. The data in Tiberius isn't managed at all by, DHEC however states have access to the federal database to monitor the progress of this important vaccination effort.

The information presented on our website today about the Moderna vaccine in this long-term care program is a reflection of this data we recently gained access to as what's recorded in Tiberius. While this is not DHEC data, it's advisable to consider this federal data provisional and subject to change just as ours is.

As we've noted on the website, all 750 long-term care facilities in South Carolina are receiving this vaccine either through this federal long-term care program or through local pharmacy partners who are enrolled as providers. DHEC has worked very hard to match every long-term care facility in South Carolina with a provider to vaccinate their residents and staff. As of this morning, 5,511 residents and 2,721 staff have received their first dose of Moderna vaccine for a total of 8,232 doses administered thus far at 114 different facilities in the state. CVS and Walgreens currently have 844 clinics scheduled, 678 of those with CVS and 166 with Walgreens at additional facilities.

We're excited about the rollout and the progress of this very important vaccine effort, however it's important for us to say that we are aware of several facilities who have opted into this federal program and they're not the type of facilities that this program was intended for. Several facilities that aren't considered long-term care facilities by definition have been included into the program, a total of 146 facilities which includes independent living ones, retirement communities and other types of congregate living centers have opted into the federal program which was intended only for three groups of facilities: skilled nursing facilities which are also known as nursing homes, community residential care facilities also commonly known as assisted living facilities, and intermediate care facilities for individuals with intellectual disabilities a type of South Carolina Department of Disabilities and Special Needs facility. This is why there are 750 long-term care facilities in South Carolina, but closer to 850 facilities that are registered in this federal long-term care program.

DHEC is reaching out to similar types of facilities who were told they weren't eligible for the program to have vaccine clinics made available through the federal partnership.

As more and more people continue to get their shots each day and as more and more doses of vaccine are being provided to the states, we know that everyone regardless of facility type will soon be able to receive their vaccine.

I’m proud to say that as a licensed medical doctor who qualifies for Phase 1A, I received my first shot of Pfizer vaccine last night at Prisma health in Greenville where I’m from. It was a truly momentous experience and I continue to be amazed at the achievements of all of our countries and our world's scientists and doctors who have worked so tirelessly to develop these vaccines that like really are saving the world additionally on the vaccine front.

Additionally, on the vaccine front today, we communicated to all South Carolina hospitals that they should begin to vaccinate or offer vaccination to their admitted patients who are ages 65 years and older, as long as they don't currently have Covid-19 and a provider feels that it's indicated for them. Having admitted patients 65 years and older to the Phase 1A eligible individuals that are currently able to receive the vaccine is part of the DHEC effort to speed up the number of South Carolinians who are getting vaccinated against Covid-19. We continue to make great strides and progress in our vaccination efforts here in South Carolina and across the country. Thank you very much.

**Cristi Moore: Thank you Dr. Traxler for that comprehensive update today. I do need to clarify- the number of Phase 1A doses that have been given, today that is 62,632 South Carolinians in Phase 1A have received their first dose of the vaccine and 7,698 have received their second dose. We'll move into the questions now. Dr. Traxler the first question you have is: I wanted to get more information about who can give the vaccine. DHEC has mentioned a few times that the agency is pursuing expanding the pool of people who can give a vaccine to EMTs, retired nurses, etc. Who can give the vaccine now and what's the holdup for just going ahead and expanding.**

**Dr. Traxler:** Right now any licensed medical professional for whom it's in their scope of practice to perform vaccinations are allowed to vaccinate in South Carolina and so that list, I can't promise is all inclusive, but includes physicians but especially nurses, pharmacists, paramedics. We have authorized for them to be able to vaccinate and the board of medical examiners has put out guidance or a statement that's clarified that medical assistants who are supervised may vaccinate. In addition we're working on other groups including EMTs, retired nurses and so forth, and this just requires some time and coordination working with other agencies particularly with LLR who have been a great partner in this and then getting some of the legal questions answered and getting it rolled out. I anticipate that next week we'll be seeing other groups brought on.

**Cristi Moore: During a vaccine update earlier this week DHEC officials stated guidance was clarified last week so hospitals could better understand who they can vaccinate outside their own system, but I wasn't quite clear on what that meant- what sort of policies or guidance has changed in the past week or so in response to requests by the governor, lawmakers and hospitals?**

**Dr. Traxler:** The Phase 1A guidance that is on our DHEC vaccines website that scdhec.gov/vaxfacts, that button near the top which is Phase 1A guidance which includes some instructions as well as a list of healthcare workers who are eligible in Phase 1A. It has been updated to more explicitly state that hospitals may vaccinate health care workers on that list who are not employed by the hospital. We have also expanded that list as groups have made groups of occupations have made requests to the vaccine advisory committee they take them into consideration and the vaccine advisory committee discusses those requests and so some of them are noted to have not been on the initial list but are on the more comprehensive list and we will continue to review those such requests and add additional subgroups onto the Phase 1A guidance as necessary.

**Cristi Moore: Thank you. Since announcement of the January 15 deadline has there been an increase of hospitals signing up workers since the announcement?
Dr. Traxler:** In terms of per hospital and in particular you would probably need to talk to that specific hospital, however we are seeing more and more appointments being made in VAMS, the database for scheduling as well as recording doses. We have seen, you know, thousands each over the last couple of days added, between 10,000 and 15,000 appointments scheduled in VAMS in the last couple of days. That does not include appointments that are scheduled at facilities that may be doing their scheduling slightly differently, such as integrating their electronic health record. So we are seeing increases in scheduling.

**Cristi Moore: What does DHEC believe is an acceptable vaccination utilization rate at this point had the agency set utilization targets ahead of time and if so what were they and is DHEC concerned about the current utilization rate?**

**Dr Traxler:** We certainly want to see as close to 100 percent as fast as we can, and certainly want to see 100 percent utilization rate without losing any vaccine, which we have not done and we are not close to doing. The vaccines can exist in the ultra-cold storage or in the normal freezer temperature, depending on which vaccine, for six months after their manufacturing date. We had set our initial goal to be in Phase 1A for again several weeks up to a couple of months, which from the start date of mid-December would have put us between mid-January and mid-February. We certainly want to see 100 percent utilization rate but also as close to 100 acceptance as we can, and we'd like to see as high of that number of uptake as possible. I think we're making very good progress - I think the utilization rates are certainly increasing and so I am satisfied that that number will continue to improve

**Cristi Moore: Tracking the numbers or percentages of frontline healthcare workers that have been offered the vaccine and declined to receive it- is that a concern and if so how does the agency plan to try to address?**

**Dr Traxler:** That is not information that DHEC has because it has been up to each healthcare system and then just now recently up to each licensee in the state for a healthcare worker to have been offered the vaccine, so we don't know how many of those for example at a hospital were offered and declined it. I would say that vaccine hesitancy overall both among health care workers and among the general population is something that is on our radar and is something that we have been working very hard to overcome and combat by using our database and our website as well as you all to help provide very factual, correct and accurate information and be as transparent as possible so that people will be able to make an informed decision that's based on evidence about what's right for them.

**Cristi Moore: Are people required to receive an invitation from the CDC in order to be vaccinated? Two hospitals have told us that to administer any vaccine the person's contact information must be put into VAMS which triggers an invitation for that person to schedule their appointment- is that the required protocol statewide?**

**Dr. Traxler:** South Carolina is using VAMS, and VAMS works by getting a name and email address uploaded into the system, and then sends an email invitation to schedule an appointment out to the person. Thus far we have relied on the health care facilities, especially these hospitals, to input these names and email addresses into VAMS so that everyone could be issued that email with the offer to schedule an appointment. We are working with LLR today to input the healthcare workers whom they license - to input their names and email addresses into VAMS so that all healthcare workers will will not have to take that additional step, and we'll be getting an email with the invitation to schedule an appointment for those. However those that may not be licensed by LLR or certified by DHEC, we still can continue to provide information in conjunction with our partners at South Carolina Hospital Association online about how to contact the correct entity at each hospital to get uploaded into VAMS and get an appointment scheduled.

**Cristi Moore: Do you know when Phase 1B guidance will be finalized?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I know the vaccine advisory committee has been meeting every week and working very hard on that, and I anticipate it will be in the very near future but i don't have a hard and fast deadline on that.

**Cristi Moore: Dr. Traxler do you know why the utilization rates for the larger hospitals that received vaccine directly from the federal government are so much lower than the utilization rates of the smaller health systems that received vaccine from DHEC?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I cannot say for certain, not being at either of those types of facilities, however two things to note are certainly the high numbers of vaccines that are being administered by our large health care systems do take some additional time to get scheduled and get coordinated, and get the logistics of actually putting the shots into people's arms worked out. Simply scheduling that many appointments can take quite a while, additionally until a couple of days ago there was an allowance for up to 72 hours for doses to be inputted into VAMS after administration and again the more doses you're administering that's even more information that has to then be put into the system. We've now put out a public health order requiring that hospitals and any vaccination provider input that information within 24 hours of administration so that should be improving.

**Cristi Moore: How quickly, if at all, could vaccinations of the long-term care facilities translate to a loosening of visitation restrictions?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I think there are two big components of information that we will just have to follow to make that determination. One will be the uptake of vaccines in the facilities both by the residents and the staff, which should also hopefully lead to a decrease in cases within the facilities, so that would be one factor that we'd be looking at as we want to make sure that there aren't cases in the facilities without increasing visitation. Then I think the other factor that we would certainly be looking at is the vaccination rate or the VAMS uptake rate, and the level of disease activity in the community that the family members would be coming from when they go into the facilities.

**Cristi Moore: We’re hearing that residents 75 or older in Phase 1B are confused about the distribution rollout and have been calling or emailing us asking when they can sign up for appointments- when will that process be finalized and explained to residents and do you know how that will work?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I do expect that process will be finalized again here in the very near future along with the more specific lists of who all might be included in Phase 1B. Certainly the age category part of 1B is already known, but that information is going to be shared with you all with on the internet basically through every type of media as we've said before . We're looking at potentially a statewide system for registration that will hopefully eliminate the need for getting an invitation to then register and through exams so that everyone else in the other Phases will not have that additional step and we'll provide information on how to contact that registration system and everything as soon as it's finalized.

**Cristi Moore: We see on your vaccine allocation spreadsheet that some facilities receive only 975 doses of Pfizer vaccine while other hospitals in South Carolina receive thousands and thousands- can you explain how the vaccine doses are divided up and passed throughout the state?**

**Dr. Traxler:** The doses - the dose allocations - are dependent first of all on how many doses we are receiving from our federal partners in the state. They are also based on how many each facility is requesting, so in some cases in some situations you know hospitals have only requested a certain amount of vaccine and therefore we have fulfilled 100 percent of their request with the allocations. In other situations, other hospitals have required much larger numbers of doses. We work very hard to fulfill as many of the orders at 100 percent of the request as we can, and I think have done an excellent job. I know for example this week we were able to meet I believe everyone's request at 100 percent.

**Cristi Moore: Thank you Dr. Traxler, I've got two sets of questions here about immunity. The first one is: what do you make of a recent report from an MIT study that indicates that those who've had the virus may enjoy eight months of immunity or longer? Can you expect years of immunity if vaccinated?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I am cautiously encouraged by the report out of MIT - I believe that we still need some more data and I know that the CDC is very actively collecting that data and looking at information to determine if they can safely make an assumption for any longer period of time than the 90 days they currently do, that a person could feel fairly confident they have immunity. I will still point out there are still sporadic, occasional cases of reinfection- they just are not common - especially in that first 90 days. I think that we need some more data but as I said I’m cautiously optimistic about it. I do find it preliminarily very encouraging and in regards to whether or not we'll be able to get years out of the vaccine when it comes to immunity, I think that information is still to come. We are still going to need to be following the participants from the clinical trials and following the data but certainly the longer that immunity does look like it's present with natural infection, then we can likely expect longer potentially from the vaccines and certainly the longer that people are getting protected from those original studies then that's a good sign.

**Cristi Moore: Does DHEC have plans in the works to do vaccination clinics for teachers at schools?**

**Dr. Traxler:** At this time the Phase 1B frontline essential workers would all have access to the same facilities at DHEC sites that are for anyone in that Phase. However, I can't speak to whether the Department of Education or school district are looking at something separately, but DHEC clinics being set up will be open to people within that Phase.

**Cristi Moore: Will DHEC build drive-through clinics, similar to what they have done in large parking lots in North Carolina and at Fort Jackson where people drive up to get the shot and then park in a reserved area of the lot for the required waiting period? If so, why have we not exercised that option? Is there a timetable for doing something similar?**

**Dr. Traxler:** That is a great question and I do want to emphasize there is still the waiting period, so I appreciate that they that they noted that in the parking lot. This is one option that we are looking at. We were talking to some of our colleagues in other places that have done it and looking into the potential for it, particularly as we progress through phases that will have larger volumes of people.

**Cristi Moore: What is the timetable for local pharmacies and doctors’ offices to receive vaccines?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Some of them will be receiving vaccines, several of them starting on Monday as well as some urgent care sites in the state and some DHEC sites as I said, so all of those entities certainly would be able within a few days to stand up vaccine clinics as they as they see fit. We are working with our partners at the CDC to allocate vaccines to the retail pharmacies to be able to provide vaccines in their local stores here in South Carolina, and anticipate those vaccines being in in the state and available initially. Eventually, hopefully all of those pharmacies starting the week after this coming week. DHEC will coordinate with health departments to enter into the next phase for mass vaccination events. We are working with our regional DHEC partners in those health departments to stand up some clinics and I believe there will be between six and eight that will be begin receiving vaccine next week, and then we'll be beginning vaccination clinics of different types depending on the region and the need in that area.

**Cristi Moore:** We were able to get through all of the questions that were submitted ahead of time so Chris Joseph with WIS has his hand raised, Chris go ahead and ask your question.

**Chris Joseph (WIS): Hi Dr. Traxler thanks for the time. Yesterday at the board meeting, obviously the CEOs of some of the major hospitals talked to DHEC board about doing something quite frankly just like this. How big of a role was that conversation- what happened after that meeting and do you have any sense of how many patients we're talking about here that that could be now vaccinated if they so choose?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I will say that the CEOs along with their staffs at the hospitals and our very valuable partners at the hospital association have been in communication with since before this pandemic began, and even more frequently since the pandemic began. These are conversations that we have been having before the board meeting with them, evaluating constantly the need and at what point we should progress to adding further groups to the current vaccination list. So those conversations continued as they were going on before, they continued after the board meeting. We felt that this was a good option that we could still have good vaccine access for everyone included on the list and also increase utilization rates and particularly targeting a particularly vulnerable part of our community in the older hospitalized patients. I don't have a number estimate in terms of the number of current inpatients there are in South Carolina over the age of 65, but that would vary depending on the hospital and size of the hospital.

**Cristi Moore:** We've got time for one more question.

**Morgan Newell (WBTV): Hey Dr. Traxler, I was just wondering as far as the admitted patients that you guys are going to start giving vaccines to. I understand that they're currently admitted to the hospital, but say you go to the hospital after the fact and are going to be admitted in the future, can those patients get vaccines and can you tell me how that possibly could speed up the process?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I don't recommend going to be admitted to the hospital as a way to get vaccinated, but but yes if people are admitted tomorrow or the following day hospitals may continue to roll this out to newly admitted patients for whom their providers feel it's appropriate and indicated, and that meet the age criteria. We do feel that, as I noted, that even among the older population that focusing on ones that are hospitalized for non-Covid reasons will focus on an aspect of that community or that population that is more susceptible to more severe disease, as they're more likely to have underlying health conditions, hence they're admitted in the hospital. This is also a vaccine that the CDC has noted there's not a contra-indication: meaning it's not a reason to not give it when someone has a decreased immune system whether it be from another illness such as HIV or whether it be due to just the stress of being hospitalized.

**Cristi Moore: For some reason we're going to go over just a minute, I’m going to give a bonus question to Judy Gatson, if you'll go ahead and ask your question Judy?**

**Judy Gatson (WIS):** **Thank you so much, I really appreciate it. I just had actually two quick questions but they are really quick. One question- what our vaccine storage capacity? To give you context for that, President-elect Biden said today that he hopes to be able to release all of the available vaccines, so I’m just wondering what our maxim storage capacity is? And what benchmarks do we have to hit- what DHEC is looking at for January 15th- to determine whether you feel confident or comfortable moving into Phase 1B?**

**Dr. Traxler:** As to the first one we'll have to get back with you with that number. I have seen it multiple times but don't have it memorized. As to what we're going to be looking at, it's rather than even one particular set of numbers that day. We're going to be trending the numbers in terms of vaccine appointment uptake, we're working with the hospitals and with the hospital association to look at that information to see how many appointments are being scheduled, how many appointments are available each day, and basically the rate at which those appointments are being filled as well as the number of available vaccines each hospital has on hand and what each of those data points are trending at in terms of whether we feel that opening it up to the next group (the Phase 1B) would be the thing to do. We'll be talking with a lot of our partners to make that decision and we'll be working with the governor's office, the hospital association and hospitals as well as other partners in the state to make that decision as a state.