**DHEC Covid-19 Vaccination Progress Media Briefing Transcript**

**January 11, 2021**

**Cristi Moore (Moderator):** Hi everyone, I want to welcome you to today's DHEC January 11th media briefing on Covid-19 in South Carolina, featuring Dr. Brannon Traxler, interim public health director, and Stephen White our DHEC immunizations director. We'd like to thank our media partners for joining us today and for helping us to spread the word far and wide on the latest information on Covid-19 vaccine in our state. Dr. Traxler is going to provide an update, then we'll move into facilitated question answers and if there's time we will also move into a live Q and A, I’ll call on folks as hands are raised, so without further ado, Dr. Traxler please provide today's update.

**Dr. Traxler:** Thanks Cristi, and good afternoon everyone, thanks for joining us. While we have new information to provide today, I plan to try to make these opening remarks fairly brief so that we can continue to answer as many of the questions as possible during the time we have.

We're continuing to make great strides in vaccinations, and those efforts in South Carolina and across the country each day more and more vaccines are being administered into the arms of South Carolinians. More than 105,800 doses of Covid-19 vaccines have been administered in our state. As of this morning, in our efforts to further expedite the rate at which the vaccine becomes more widely available to all South Carolinians, today DHEC and the governor's office announced that all South Carolinians who are age 70 and older, regardless of their health status or presence or lack of any pre-existing conditions, can begin scheduling appointments this Wednesday January 13th for their Covid-19 vaccine.

This is an extraordinary announcement because those aged 70 and older have been the most devastated by this disease in our state; as noted in our news release today the mortality rate from Covid-19 for those 70 and older is approximately 655 deaths per 100,000 individuals. Then you compare that to those under the age of 70: there are only approximately 37 Covid-19 deaths per 100,000 individuals. That is a very staggering comparison and illustrates why vaccinating those 70 and older is a critical next step in our mission to save lives. More than 67 percent, two-thirds, of Covid-19 deaths in South Carolina have been among those aged 70 years and older. We estimate that there are roughly 627,800 South Carolinians who are age 70 or older in South Carolina.

Although it is important to recognize that many of those residents have already received their vaccine either through the long-term care federal pharmacy vaccine program that's underway, or for some there are front line medical workers who were eligible for the vaccine that way.

Launching today is a new online tool that provides a resource for locating a facility where those 70 and older can make an appointment to receive their vaccines. We will continue to work to have more and more locations offering vaccines, especially in those rural and underserved communities who may not have a healthcare facility or hospital nearby.

Mobile clinics will be an essential part of our plans to bring vaccines to the people. We understand that some of our elderly populations aren't comfortable with navigating websites or sending emails, and that's why anyone can also call our care line and our care line staff can assist with providing the correct contact information for scheduling an appointment. The care line number is 1-855-472-3432.

It is important to remember that both vaccines currently available require two shots, and it's important for everyone to receive both of those shots. Both the Pfizer-Biontec and the Moderna vaccines are 94-95 percent effective in preventing disease, but that's only after both shots are administered. Individuals will receive a vaccine card after receiving their first shot reminding them of when their second shot is due.

Many providers are also issuing second-dose appointment reminders to patients by way of phone calls, emails or text messages. In addition, those who are healthcare providers who were registered through VAMS to be vaccinated and to schedule their appointments will also receive reminders via VAMS.

It is also important to reiterate that the vaccines work with your immune system, so that your body will be ready to help keep you from becoming sick if you're exposed to the virus. However, other steps like masks and physical distancing are what help reduce your chance of being exposed to the virus or infected or potentially spreading it to others. Vaccines are here and they are a light at the end of the tunnel, but until enough of us receive full vaccination we must continue to wear masks, stay physically distant from others, limit contact with those outside of our household, and stay home if we're sick. And be tested. Thank you very much and I think we'll now turn it over to questions.

**Cristi Moore: Thank you Dr. Traxler for that update, the first two questions are “how long does the current appointment list extend out” and secondly, based on that length, what is your estimation of when Phase 1B guidance will be finalized and Phase 1B vaccinations would begin?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I cannot tell you an average length for the appointment list extending out, because more and more appointments as you've seen from the numbers are being made at every site every day, and that is very specific to each vaccination provider in terms of how far out they are providing their vaccination schedules.

We anticipate that more and more guidance, just like some did today, is going to continue to come out in the coming days and weeks and that more and more populations will be invited to sign up or register for an appointment for vaccination.

**Cristi Moore: In regard to Phase 1B, we continue to receive lots of questions about who is in Phase 1B and subsequent phases, and why individuals are in certain phases. Please help clarify again how it is determined who is in each phase of the vaccine rollout plan?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Certainly. So first the CDC, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has a committee called the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, ACIP for short. The ACIP is comprised of multiple stakeholders from a variety of different domains including not only medicine and science, but ethics and other groups. They come together and they have reviewed all of the data both about the disease and the virus and the pandemic statistics, and also about the vaccines. They are the ones who initially come out with recommendations for the phases and who is in what phase. They vote after they've had a public comment period where anyone from the public anywhere nationwide can submit their input. Then they have further discussion and debate, and they vote on what groups or what criteria are qualified for each phase. That is then guidance that is provided out nationwide to the states.

In South Carolina we then have the South Carolina Covid-19 Vaccine Advisory Committee, the VAC, and they take this guidance from ACIP and apply it to the population of South Carolina. The VAC is made up of about two dozen members who are representing really all aspects of our diverse population in South Carolina, and they take the guidance from the from the national level and apply it to be specific for South Carolina. Then they provide those recommendations to DHEC, who together with our state partners make a state decision.

**Cristi Moore: Thank you Dr. Traxler. If South Carolina residents 70 and older can begin scheduling their appointments this Wednesday, how soon could they actually begin receiving their shots?**

**Dr. Traxler:** This is going to be dependent on each location: each vaccination provider's appointment availability, how many appointments they had available to begin with, how many are booked with healthcare workers from Phase 1A, and how many are going to be opening up in the coming weeks.

It is important to remember that we still have limited vaccine here at the beginning, but each week we are receiving more and more vaccine and we're bringing more and more locations onboard to help provide it. So if you are not successful at getting an appointment initially, just keep trying and you'll get your appointment.

**Cristi Moore: Dr. Traxler has DHEC been warned of any supply chain issues that might slow delivery of new doses?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I am not aware of any specific supply chain issue, however that is something that we are aware could become a problem and have been monitoring from the beginning and will continue to monitor both supply chain and production, and making sure that the manufacturing and production of the vaccines does not have any issues at any point along the way. That or supply chain issues are potentially very real things that could happen. We are not aware of any specific current ones and are monitoring it along with our federal partners closely.

**Cristi Moore: Thank you. Stephen, what is the latest data on vaccine waste and expired doses in our state?**

**Stephen White:** Thanks for the question. As of today, we are still seeing minimal doses that are being wasted, and this is based on the provider-level that we get this information from. Just like we would handle any other storage handling requirements, we're in constant contact with providers - if they do happen to have any kind of temperature concerns or questions, we are answering those on an individual basis to those providers.

**Cristi Moore: Dr. Traxler, after getting vaccinated, how safe is it to be around someone with Covid-19? And secondly, do you still have to wear a mask?**

**Dr. Traxler:** The short answer for the second part is yes, and it is still not very safe to be around someone who has Covid-19 even if you are fully vaccinated. These vaccines do a very good job, 94 to 95 percent effective, at preventing you from getting sick, preventing disease, preventing the virus from doing damage to your body if you get infected. We do not have data- we do not know- about its ability to actually prevent you from getting infected, from getting the virus into you, and therefore we don't know if you could continue to pass it on to other people, to continue to be contagious even though you're fully vaccinated and may feel fine. So that is why especially if you have to be around somebody with Covid-19 I would recommend it only be absolutely as necessary, and that you both are wearing appropriate personal protective equipment including masks for both of you. It's why wearing masks about and when we're interacting with the public as we get vaccinated is still important, because until we have enough of the population vaccinated to slow and then stop the spread of the virus at all in the communities, we could risk getting it and passing it on to someone else even if we're fully vaccinated.

**Cristi Moore: The utilization rate of the Moderna vaccine is 19.7 percent. Understanding that it is a federal program, has DHEC received any explanation for the pace of the administration?**

**Dr. Traxler:** The logistical details of this federal pharmacy long-term care program are determined by the federal government and the pharmacies, in conjunction with the facilities. We do not have the schedule for the program in South Carolina and the information and data that we have is what is we've also made available to you all. We have already allocated all of the doses that are needed for the entire program, which I believe is partially why we're seeing a lower utilization rate. It does take a few weeks to vaccinate all of the facilities in South Carolina, but they already had all of the doses, so I expect that utilization rate to continue to increase steadily as we go through and more and more facilities are offered vaccinations.

**Cristi Moore: If someone has had an allergic reaction to other vaccinations should they be cautious about getting the Covid-19 vaccine?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Potentially that is something if they have had a severe allergic reaction, something like anaphylaxis swelling or hives, then I would recommend that you talk to your doctor who's familiar with your medical history and together you and your doctor make an educated decision then about whether or when you should be vaccinated against Covid-19.

**Cristi Moore: VAMS has been a target of scrutiny lately, how close is DHEC to moving to another system and what would that entail, Stephen?**

**Stephen White:** Right now, VAMS is an invitation-only by email, and DHEC is currently looking at all available options for patients to be able to sign up to receive an invitation to the system. VAMS has already provided several updates and they will continue to do so. They're currently working on a solution to help with this issue as far as patients being able to sign up to receive an invitation without having to get something directly to from a provider, instead having some sort of web portal. They're currently working on that piece and DHEC is also looking at all available options to be able to assist, in the event that doesn't come quick enough. One solution available online right now with the DHEC website is the list of providers that have eligible clinics where individuals can contact beginning January 13 to see what available appointments exist.

**Cristi Moore: Thanks and Dr. Traxler how long after testing positive can a person receive the vaccine?**

**Dr. Traxler:** As soon as a person who has tested positive is recovered from their illness, and also has met the criteria for release from isolation, they are eligible to be vaccinated. However a re-infection with the Covid-19 virus within that first 90 days after infection is rare, so people might want to consider waiting to be vaccinated until closer to the end of their 90 days to allow more at-risk people who do not have any antibodies to be vaccinated before them. But it is considered safe as soon as they are recovered and have met those criteria for release from isolation.

**Cristi Moore: If a part-time South Carolina resident receives their first dose in South Carolina then returns home to another state, could they receive the second dose in that other state, or do they have to receive both doses in the same state?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We certainly encourage people to get their second dose at the same place they got their first dose for logistical reasons, those logistical reasons include the fact that you have to get the same brand for that second dose as you did for the first. However, people in this situation could receive their second dose in their home state if there was a vaccine provider in their home state who had the vaccine available and the correct one to give them. It's really important those first and second doses have to be the same brand, so that is why we do recommend to the extent possible people go back to the same place for their second shot as they got there first.

**Cristi Moore: Thank you Dr. Traxler. We did have a glitch when we were setting up our media telebriefing today, so many of our media partners were in another meeting and Dr. Traxler unfortunately they missed your opening update so if you wouldn't mind terribly, can you please re-give that opening update for our media partners?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Sure. Okay so good afternoon again everyone, I did keep the opening remarks fairly brief today because we do have new information to provide, but we wanted to be able to answer as many questions as we could we are continuing to make great strides in our vaccination efforts. Both here in South Carolina and across the country each day, more and more vaccines are being administered into the arms of South Carolinians. More than one 105,800 doses of Covid-19 vaccines have been administered in our state as of this morning, in efforts to further expedite the rate at which the vaccine becomes more widely available and utilized by South Carolinians.

Today DHEC and the Governor's office announced that all South Carolinians who are aged 70 years and older, regardless of their health status or any pre-existing conditions, can begin scheduling appointments this upcoming Wednesday on January 13 to receive their Covid-19 vaccine. This is very important because those who are 70 and older have been the most devastated by the disease in our state. As noted in the news release today, the mortality rate from Covid-19 in South Carolina for those who are age 70 years and older is about 655 deaths per 100,000 individuals. For those people under the age of 70 there are approximately 37 deaths from Covid-19 per 100,000 individuals. That is a staggering comparison or contrast, and it illustrates why vaccinating those 70 and older is a really critical next step in our mission to save lives. More than 67 percent, or two-thirds of Covid-19 deaths in South Carolina have been among persons aged 70 years or older. We estimate that there are roughly 627,800 South Carolinians who are age 70 and older. Many of these residents, it is important to note, may have already received their vaccine either through the long-term care federal pharmacy partnership program that's underway, or some of them may be front-line medical workers who are eligible for the vaccine.

We also launched today a new online tool that provides a resource for locating a facility where those who are 70 years and older can make an appointment, beginning Wednesday, to receive their vaccine.

We are continuing to work to have more and more locations offering the vaccine especially in those rural and underserved communities who may not have a hospital nearby. Mobile clinics will be a part of our plans to bring the vaccine to the people. We understand that some of our elderly populations aren't comfortable with navigating websites or using email, so that's why anyone can call our careline and our careline staff can assist by providing the correct contact information for scheduling an appointment The careline number is 1-855-472-3432.

It is also important to remember that both vaccines currently available require two shots, and it's important for everyone to receive both of those shots. Both the Pfizer-Biontec and the Moderna vaccines are 94-95 percent effective in preventing disease, but that's only after you receive both doses.

Individuals will receive a vaccine card after receiving their first shot that reminds them when that second shot is due. Many providers are also issuing second dose reminders to individuals by way of phone calls, text messages or emails. In addition, if you registered through VAMS for your appointment, VAMS will give you a reminder to schedule your appointment for your second dose and to show up for your second dose

It is important to reiterate that the vaccines work with your immune system so that your body will be ready to help keep you from getting sick if you're exposed to anyone infected by the virus. However, other steps like masks and physical distancing are what help reduce your chances if you're exposed to actually being infected by the virus and potentially spreading to others.

Vaccines are here and they are a light at the end of the tunnel, but until enough of us are vaccinated fully we must continue to wear masks stay physically distant from others, limit contact with people outside of our household, and stay home and get tested if we are sick or with any symptoms.

 **Cristi Moore: Is it proven that the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines can lead to herd immunity, considering it's unknown where their doses can prevent transmission, and then secondly do they prevent asymptomatic infections?**

**Dr. Traxler:** No, these vaccines do not necessarily prevent asymptomatic infections, we just don't have the data yet to know whether that occurs or not, and that is something that is being studied now and will continue to be studied in further trials. If everyone were to get vaccinated, you still could have herd immunity because if there is nobody unvaccinated then the virus really has nobody, no population, to spread amongst. Whether or not these vaccines can prevent transmission will affect potentially what percentage of people we need to have fully vaccinated in order to reach herd immunity, but we still could reach it eventually even if they don't prevent transmission. You just have to get a lot closer to 100 percent.

**Cristi Moore: Who or what is setting South Carolina's eligibility rules, or the Covid-19 vaccine logistics agenda? Who's in charge?**

**Dr. Traxler:** The South Carolina Covid-19 Vaccine Advisory Committee takes the guidance, as I said before, from the CDC’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, ACIP, and applies it to South Carolina and provides their recommendations to DHEC. DHEC is working with its partners to finalize the eligibility criteria and logistics as statewide decisions.

**Cristi Moore: As South Carolinians wait for the vaccine, how can the public help those in the hospital suffering with Covid-19 regarding plasma donations from those with antibodies?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I would say that certainly donating convalescent plasma after you have been infected and recovered from Covid-19 is always recommended. At this time, you know, all blood donations (are important). I would strongly encourage them - our hospitals use blood donations - all the different components of it including plasma and that convalescent plasma specifically for Covid-19. As we see more and more patients who are having severe disease and who are being hospitalized and a number of them having to go to the ICU and being put on ventilators, there's more and more need for the few treatments that we do have for this disease, and one of those is convalescent plasma.

**Cristi Moore: Stephen, last week it was stated that approved doctors’ offices would receive shipments of vaccines beginning this week. How are those offices being informed that shipments are on the way and how much they are to receive?**

**Stephen White:** Those offices were offices that we brought on last week, for which we're calling onboarding week, and we do this each week. Those offices were notified by DHEC a week ago, so last Monday they participated in a series of onboarding trainings, and last week we had some town halls that answering questions that they might have related to VAMS, and some of them also received their allocation amounts as early as this past Friday. Some of them actually receive their doses today- the Pfizer doses came today and some of the Moderna doses came on Friday, and we'll continue this process of bringing on additional providers. We're working this week to bring on additional providers to receive vaccines next week, and we'll continue that trend as long as vaccine doses are available, and we'll work to continue to bring on as many providers as we possibly can.

**Cristi Moore: Dr. Traxler, how will DHEC work with providers to ensure that all seniors who get the first dose receive their second dose of vaccine?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Just like with anyone who receives that first dose, we will be working with providers to communicate the importance of getting their second dose, and, you know, the real need for it as well as reminding them of when and how and where to get that second dose. So, I would say for the seniors it may be some slightly different forms of communication than for younger populations. We'll be using all different types of media including the regular mail with regular postal mail postcards reminding folks, telephone calls as I said, and then maybe for some of the younger folks text messages or emails to get reminders.

**Cristi Moore: This will be our last question- when will children with underlying conditions be able to get vaccinated?**

**Dr. Traxler:** The two vaccines, the Pfizer-Biontech and the Moderna that are currently available, do not have an emergency use authorization. They're not authorized for use in children under the age of 16 for Pfizer or 18 from Moderna. Covid-19 vaccines overall are still being studied in children and we don't have an estimate yet for if or when they would be authorized for children, based on what the results look like of those studies.

**Cristi Moore:** Thank you Dr. Traxler. In closing I'd like to repeat the important scheduling information for your viewers or readers. That online tool again is found at scdhec.gov vax locator - individuals can also call care line at 1-855-472-3432. We would ask that you remind Phase 1A individuals to schedule their shots now for that priority scheduling before Wednesday is opened up to those folks that are 70 and older. Again, we'll continue to hold these regular briefings at least twice a week, our next one is more than likely will be Wednesday, thank you for joining us again and until next time stay healthy.