**DHEC Vaccine Update Transcript**

**January 27, 2021**

**Cristi Moore:** Good afternoon everyone, sorry for the brief delay, first of all to welcome to DHEC’s January 27 media briefing on the Covid-19 vaccine in South Carolina. I'm Cristi Moore, DHEC chief communications officer and I’ll be facilitating today's briefing with Dr. Brannon Traxler, DHEC interim public health director. These briefings are held to share the latest updates, and answer questions about Covid-19 vaccines. DHEC appreciates the South Carolina press and its commitment to help us keep South Carolinians informed. As to the run of show, Dr. Traxler will provide a brief update, we'll move into facilitated Q and A portion, and I will open it up for a live Q and A if time permits. I would like to remind everyone to please remain on mute so that we get a good quality recording. And at this time I am going to turn it over to Dr. Brannon Traxler for today's update.

**Dr. Traxler:** Thank you Cristi and good afternoon everyone. I do want to start off today's briefing by sharing some very positive news for our state. Yesterday we received word from the federal government that beginning next week, we will be receiving a 16 percent overall increase in how many first doses of the Covid-19 vaccines that we will receive each week in South Carolina. That takes us from 62,600 first doses received this week to an increased total of 72,600 first doses that we should receive next week, which includes 41,400 doses next week of the Moderna vaccine. And to put that number a little bit in perspective, this week we received 31,400 first doses for Moderna from the federal government, so that's 10,000 more first doses a week that are going to be going into the arms of South Carolinians beginning next week. The number of doses of Pfizer that we receive is not expected to change. At this time we have been told that the number of doses that we receive next week will remain at the same consistent level over the next three weeks.

To date South Carolina has received 622,350 doses of the Covid-19 vaccines and that includes 341,250 doses of Pfizer and 281,100 doses of Moderna.

We have given 297,453 doses of Covid-19 vaccines to the public, there are 329,270 appointments scheduled to receive the vaccines. While modest in number, the small increase in the Moderna vaccine doses will help further our efforts to vaccinate as many people as possible, as soon as possible, however it is important to remember that the demand for vaccines still exceeds the federal supply or the supply that South Carolina is receiving from the federal government. We will be working with providers this week to determine the allocation of these additional vaccines that we'll get beginning next week, and we'll update you on next steps as soon as we have that information.

In other good news a new national report shows that South Carolina now ranks 10th among states in the nation for how quickly the state is getting the Covid-19 vaccine doses it receives put into people's arms. Becker's Hospital Review, which is a national health care information forum, released its daily states ranked by percentage of Covid-19 vaccines administered report today. South Carolina is today the 10th ranking state for already having administered nearly 61 percent of the total doses of vaccines received. I do want to note that this report is a daily report and it will change daily and you will see some ebb and flow and rankings from day to day, while South Carolina like other states currently faces limited supplies of vaccines.

DHEC continues to work with the governor, the South Carolina Hospital Association, South Carolina Medical Association hospitals, and other key part providers to help get vaccines into the arms of South Carolinians as quickly as possible. Our ultimate goal here is to save lives. we thank the vaccine providers across our state for all of the hard work they're doing to get the Covid-19 vaccines out and into the public. To help you better understand the meat of the Becker's report, you need to understand that this report uses data from the CDC to provide a uniform comparison of vaccine usage among states. It shows a utilization rate as the total doses administered out of the total doses received. We had a few questions that were relating the report to what the CDC has been previously provided on their website. The Becker’s report, while it does use the CDC data, the way that Becker’s and the CDC present that data are different.

In mid-January the CDC had indicated that South Carolina was among the lowest states for doses distributed and for doses administered per 100,000 population, but that reporting failed to take into consideration that South Carolina has dedicated a lump sum in a statewide effort to fully vaccinate every long-term care facility resident and staff member in the state into that program. A utilization rate as a percentage, as is used in the Becker’s report, is a much more accurate reporting metric ,especially for drawing comparisons between states.

Again I’d like to thank all of our partners and staff for all of their help in what has and continues to be a monumental lift for our state and for our nation. We continue to make great progress in our vaccine rollout across South Carolina, and the biggest challenge has been and continues to be the limited doses of vaccines that are available to the state. All states are dealing with challenges during this historic vaccine rollout, but I am confident that South Carolina will continue to address the challenges in front of us now and those ahead of us head-on. In the meantime, we need to continue to have everyone take those small actions that make big differences in helping to save lives. Those are wearing your masks, practicing physical distancing, avoiding crowds and group gatherings, staying home when you're sick even just slightly sick, getting tested often and when it's your turn getting both doses of your Covid-19 vaccine. Thank you Cristi, we can do some questions now.

**Cristi Moore: Dr. Traxler, our first question is why is there such a discrepancy between the total doses received through the long-term care program and the amount of doses administered?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We are aware of some issues with pharmacies recording their clinic information within the federal Tiberius database. This has led to some delays in reporting or incomplete entries, and it's important to remember that what we provide online is exact data from Tiberius, it isn't data that's managed or entered by DHEC staff, and we do have DHEC staff though who are assisting as requested or as needed for this federal vaccination effort, but our role is very limited.

**Cristi Moore: With this federal long-term care program, are the total doses received through the program, currently 203,400, an accurate reflection of the total amount of residents and staff in our state's long-term care facilities?**

**Dr. Traxler:** It isn't precise, we dedicated 203,400 combined first and second doses to the program to ensure that all long-term care facility residents and staff in the state are covered fully by the program. This number is likely an overshot because facility bed utilization and the number of staff for each facility changes each day, so we had to make an educated guess to make sure that we would have more than enough vaccine available on hand for this important vaccine effort the long-term care facilities in South Carolina. We have a total bed count of about 44,000, so for two doses that's about 88,000 doses. The CDC assumes a one-to-one staffing ratio for planning purposes so that's another 88,000 doses, now basically put aside, and planning for staff, which takes it to 176,000 doses. As you'll recall, some congregate facilities other than long-term care facilities by definition were able to opt in to this federal program, and we allocated based off of the total number of facilities enrolled in the in the federal long-term care program. Not just those who are by definition long-term care facilities, so those residents and staff are the of the non-long-term care facility by definition, locations comprise the remaining roughly 27,400 doses, which are both first and second doses.

**Cristi Moore: Are you satisfied at the speed in which the vaccine rollout is taking place in our state's long-term care facilities?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Well while we'd like for these clinics to be happening more rapidly, we have seen huge progress made. The vast majority of skilled nursing facilities and the community residential care facilities, so the nursing homes and assisted living facilities in the state, have been vaccinated with at least their first dose, their first clinic, within one month's time. Those clinics began in our state with Moderna doses on December 28, and so we're still even a day shy of the month for that one month time period. This vaccination effort really is an enormous undertaking, to go to this many different facilities and provide the vaccination, but it's how we're working to ensure that the most vulnerable among us to Covid-19, the elderly and those residing in congregate living housing, are protected.

**Cristi Moore: DHEC has increasingly put out messaging about the importance of getting the second dose, are there large numbers of people who are not making those second dose appointments in South Carolina?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I don't have anything that indicates that people aren't making their second appointments, but we really just want to reiterate to everyone that both vaccines are currently available right now to people in the state. They require two shots to give your maximum amount of protection, this isn't the flu shot where you're where you're one and done. Future Covid-19 vaccines may require just one shot, but both the Pfizer and the Moderna ones out there right now require two, and we want to make sure that everyone fully understands that that they need both shots so that they can ensure that they do get both doses to get that maximum protection possible. And so we remind everyone that, we really strongly recommend that you not leave your first-dose appointment until your second-dose appointment is scheduled. We recommend getting your second dose at the same place where you got your first dose, so when you leave your first dose you should know where and when you're going to be getting your second dose.

**Cristi Moore: Where will next week's extra Moderna vaccines be allocated to?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We are still reviewing the requests for next week that were submitted yesterday, and we're also going to be working with our partners in this whole vaccination effort to determine the allocations of these additional 10,000 doses. And as I said earlier, we'll keep you guys up to date.

**Cristi Moore: Can you describe what the upcoming front door portal will look like to someone trying to make an appointment? Any updates on its launch date?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We will publicly announce both the new vaccine only call center and the new vaccine appointment scheduler when both are live and ready to launch. The call center should be ready to go by the end of this week and our IT experts are working with the vaccine providers across the state to ensure that the appointment scheduler is ready to launch without any hiccups. The intent of this new scheduler is to make it easier to schedule appointments, especially for those without the internet or email addresses, so more information to come soon on those.

**Cristi Moore: What do you think of President Biden's plan to get 17 more vaccines to the states for the next few weeks? What could this do for the phase timeline, and also how do you feel about the plan to potentially have all Americans vaccinated by summer? Is this realistic?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I and DHEC support all the plans that get more doses into South Carolina, because the more doses of vaccine that we can get flowing into our state then the quicker we can get them into South Carolinians arms and reach that hopeful herd immunity point. So I certainly like, as I said, any plan we do that that brings more doses here. And as well the more doses that are coming in the pipeline, into the state, especially sooner, then is going to help move up the phase timeline. That also is dependent on people, the amount of demand and people wanting to get vaccinated, and while I hope that supply does drastically increase, I do hope that demand also continues to remain high, because we really need the majority of the population vaccinated in terms of whether the potential for having all Americans vaccinated by summer. Whether it's realistic I don't know, it will depend a lot on the stability and the production and manufacturing of doses, and on how the vaccines that are currently in phase three clinical trials and how good their data looks, how quickly they do or don't get emergency use authorization and therefore start coming in that pipeline as well.

**Cristi Moore: A couple of weeks ago Superintendent Spearman and state education groups asked for teachers to be given priority by giving them an opportunity to be vaccinated before Phase 1B opens to everyone. This morning a state lawmaker joined them on making that request saying once 1A nears completion our 50,000 teachers should be moved into 1A. It would take less than a week of supply for a profession that is in close contact with essentially the whole community. What does DHEC answer to that request right now?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Teachers and school staff are currently planning to be included in the next phase of vaccine distribution in Phase 1B. The South Carolina Covid-19 Vaccine Advisory Committee has made some draft recommendations for those who should be included in 1B, and that is available on the vaccine advisory committee's website, but that phase 1B guidance has not been finalized or formally adopted yet in our state. I do expect that to occur within the next week, we absolutely understand how essential the health and well-being of our state's teachers and school staff and educators is to bringing normalcy back into the classroom, and are working to fairly and equitably distribute the state's very limited number of doses of vaccines to those who are the most critical in our state's workforce.

**Cristi Moore: Is there, and, or do you anticipate any excess vaccine after shots have been completed at long-term care facilities? And if so where would that vaccine go?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Yes, any of those Moderna vaccines that are left over from the long-term care facility federal pharmacy partnership and those vaccination efforts in the long-term care facilities will be put back into the pool of vaccines in South Carolina for anyone who's currently eligible to receive their shots. It will go into that more general pool for providers in the state, from which they can give vaccines.

**Cristi Moore: For those vaccinated at the fairgrounds, when and how should people expect to be notified that they are able to get their second shot, and also where will those shots be administered?**

**Dr. Traxler:** DHEC staff has been calling this week everyone who received their first dose at the state fairgrounds, to ensure that they have a second-dose appointment scheduled, and they're working to make sure that everyone who got their first dose there also gets their second dose in a timely fashion.

**Cristi Moore: Can you quantify how many people are from out of state that are receiving vaccine or is this information not being tracked?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I don't have that data or information in front of me. I would believe it's being recorded in the federal database, but just to reiterate as we've talked about several times before on these briefings, you know it's the goal of all states to vaccinate as many people as possible. This virus knows no boundaries, or state or county boundaries, or borders we rely on our neighboring states to be taking the same actions that we are to stop Covid-19 in and around our state. And just like non-South Carolina residents can get vaccinated here South Carolina, our residents are getting vaccinated in other states, particularly our border states where they may work or be temporarily staying. We need to help out our neighboring states as they're helping us out and getting as many prioritized individuals vaccinated as quickly as possible.

**Cristi Moore: Are you tracking the demographics of those receiving the vaccine, things such as race and age, and if so how may we get this information?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We are developing an online dashboard that will provide an interactive kind of visual representation of vaccine distribution across the state. The dashboard will include demographic breakdowns for those vaccinated by age range gender and then racial and ethnic backgrounds as well as geographic information, I believe at the county level for individuals vaccinated. This new vaccine dashboard will be launched shortly in the coming weeks, and will provide a more complete overview of vaccine administration across the state, not just the limited information that's currently captured in VAMS.

**Cristi Moore: Two legislators in Horry and Georgetown counties have submitted proposals to the governor and DHEC requesting the appointment of a former National Guard general to be a vaccination logistics coordinator for the state. Has DHEC received this request, and does it have a comment or update on the matter at this time?**

**Dr. Traxler:** It is important to remember that DHEC is not aware of any significant delays or issues related to the transport and delivery of vaccine to providers during this ongoing rollout of the state's vaccine plan that's been going on for over a month now. The challenge is, and remains, the limited number of doses of vaccine that are coming into the state. Most hospitals and other providers receive their weekly vaccine doses directly from the federal government, it doesn't come through DHEC first for redistribution. The vast majority of the hospitals receive those their shipments straight to their doorstep from the federal government or the manufacturer of the vaccine via the federal government.

DHEC and the Emergency Management Division and the South Carolina National Guard all have logistics experts who are part of the state's vaccine task force. They work extremely well together and are dedicated to ensuring that the vaccine distribution rollout goes smoothly and is outlined in the state's vaccine plan.

**Cristi Moore: Does the state need any of the FEMA vaccination sites suggested in a draft plan by the Biden administration recently?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We have hundreds of enrolled providers wanting to give the vaccine in South Carolina, and we greatly appreciate all of those medical providers being willing and wanting to help out by doing that. What we have a shortage of is vaccinations, or vaccine doses. We have more and more enrolled providers that we can activate and get vaccines to them to put into the arms of South Carolinians, we just need to get more vaccine coming into the state.

**Cristi Moore: When will we start getting to see the list of providers receiving the Moderna vaccine?**

**Dr. Traxler:** For the non-long-term care facility program, we are planning to provide a by-facility spreadsheet for the Moderna vaccine, similar to the Pfizer one. There are some delays and incomplete entries with what's been recorded now for those doses. The Moderna has only been available outside of the long-term care facility program in our state for two weeks, so it still is a new process for many of those providers and entities. We're working with those providers to have this information logged into the system more accurately so that the information then is as accurate and timely, as current as possible, to then be able to provide it publicly.

**Cristi Moore: Has DHEC received any reports of people cutting the line in terms of phases?**

**Dr. Traxler:** South Carolina's phase guidelines are very carefully developed recommendations, not requirements, for ensuring that the entire state cohesively rolls out the state's vaccine plan as intended. We can't we can't state strongly enough how important it is for providers to follow these guidelines. Not adhering to them means that those who have been identified for being at the highest risk for potentially dying due to Covid-19, and who are waiting patiently to receive their shots, get bumped back in line, and that's just unacceptable. Any provider who chooses to not follow the state's vaccine phase guidelines is creating chaos, frustration and confusion, and all providers should be adhering to our guidelines to ensure uniform rollout of the plan as intended.

**Cristi Moore: Is Walgreens currently vaccinating essential workers, including teachers?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Similar to the last question, we are aware of some examples that we have been given of various vaccine providers giving vaccinations to groups of people or individuals who are in groups of people where it is not yet their turn, who are not in phase 1A and we want to strongly discourage this we strongly encourage everyone we need everyone to follow the state's vaccine plan and the phased recommendations.

**Cristi Moore: Are providers in the federally qualified retailers program subject to South Carolina's guidance and phases?**

**Dr. Traxler:** For that, assume we're talking about the retail pharmacies for the federal pharmacy retail pharmacy partnership, and yes they are subject to South Carolina's guidance and phases. We ask that all vaccine providers in the state, regardless of through which mechanism their allocated vaccines, adhere to the state's very carefully and well thought through vaccine plan to ensure that there is a fair and equitable vaccination effort across the state.

**Cristi Moore:** Thank you Dr. Traxler. We've got a few moments left, so Nick I think you had your hand raised first. Please ask your question, thank you.

**Nick: Dr. Traxler I had a quick question following up on supply issues. Mass vaccinations have been brought up many, many times during these briefings. How many vaccines would South Carolina need to be getting each week in order to make those mass vaccination events feasible?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I don't know that there's a set number for the entire state to make that feasible because it really depends on different locations that we have in our state, in the different parts of the state, and accessibility to a mass vaccination site and to other providers in that area. It may be worth it, feasible for for one part of the state to do something like that earlier or at a smaller level than it would in other parts of the state, just based on the provider availability in that area and just the ability of the people to get to those sites.

**Morgan Newell: Hi, thanks. Dr. Traxler I was wondering, I know you mentioned how the additional vaccines will obviously help speed up the process, but can you tell me how soon the additional doses could really start making a difference in the state?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We anticipate that these extra 10,000 doses will be in the shipments that are arrived at the state at the beginning of each week, so I anticipate that those 10,000 doses will be getting in people's arms as soon as the early part of next week and then as we said three weeks we should see that extra impact.

**Cristi Moore: And Judy Gatson, you've got a question?**

**Judy Gatson: Good afternoon everybody, thanks so much Cristi and Dr. Traxler. Dr. Traxler, I just wanted to get clarification, we're getting a lot of questions from caregivers of vulnerable adults and they're trying to understand the decision to allow the caregivers of vulnerable children to go ahead and get vaccinated, to add them to the current eligibility, but not the caregivers of older adults who are considered to be at higher risk than the children. What's the best way to explain the decision-making process and when those people might be added in?**

**Dr. Traxler:**  The Vaccine Advisory Committee has provided the recommendation to include the parents as caregivers of the medically fragile, the medically complex children, which I believe is actually a waiver program through the Department of Health and Human Services and Medicaid waiver program. It's actually an entity that's somewhat definable. My understanding is that it was the Vaccine Advisory Committee's intent when they were drawing up this guidance, and the individuals that care for others certainly, you know are just as everyone else is in the state a priority to get vaccinated. But you know at this point that the Vaccine Advisory Committee is having to provide guidance for those who are in the very first phase, and then we will be working to finalize based on their recommendations and guidance going forward with future phases. So I don't know for certain when other groups will be.

**Cristi Moore:** And Madison can you ask the last question for today's briefing please?

**Madison:** **Thank you so much Cristi and Dr. Traxler. I just wanted to ask again about the upcoming scheduler. I know that last week you thought that that would be able to launch this week, has there been any IT issues that are pushing back that deadline, or start date rather, and then also are hospitals going to have to opt in to be a part of this scheduler or is that something that everyone will have to be a part of?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I am not aware of any significant IT issue, like any one issue in particular. Our IT team has been working day and night non-stop for weeks on this at this point, and it just wants to ensure that there absolutely are no hiccups when it's rolled out and that it is ready to go and be used by as many South Carolinians want to use it. Once we get it rolled out, part of that whole process includes communication with some of the IT representatives from some of the various types of providers, to ensure that that everyone, every different option, is looked at and every need or desire from each of the different providers is taken into consideration. I don't have the specifics yet in terms of whether each entity will tie into it, and how that would happen and such.

**Cristi Moore:** I just wanted to remind folks at the beginning of the briefing I think we started around 2:02 today, at around two o'clock today we did issue a news release about South Carolina speeding up its vaccine efforts and being ranked in the top 10 in the nation, so please take a look at that and help us spread the word. I’d like to thank Dr. Traxler and our media partners for joining us today, we will continue our ongoing vaccine conversation on Friday, this concludes today's briefing.