**DHEC Covid-19 Vaccine Update Transcript**

**Jan. 4, 2021**

**Cristi Moore (Moderator):** Hi everyone, this is Cristi Moore with DHEC and I’m going to be facilitating today's media briefing on the Covid-19 vaccine in South Carolina with Dr. Brannon Traxler, DHEC interim public health director, and Stephen White, immunization director. We'd like to thank you all for joining us today for this important update and also for submitting your questions ahead of time. Dr. Traxler is going to provide an update, then we'll move into our facilitated question and answer portion. If there's still time towards the end I will open it up for live Q and A, you can raise your hand at that time and I’ll just call on whoever raises their hand first, and then I will have some closing remarks. So without further ado Dr. Traxler, let's get started.

**Dr. Traxler:** All right, thank you Cristi and thank you everyone for joining. As Cristi said, so good afternoon, welcome to January in 2021. As of this morning 43,227 doses of the Pfizer-Biontec Covid-19 vaccine have been administered in South Carolina, these Pfizer doses continue to be administered to more and more Phase 1A individuals every day and this 43,227 number does not include the number of vaccination appointments that are currently scheduled for Phase 1A individuals as those folks step up to the plate to get to their shot.

We just held a media briefing and update over the weekend, there is one significant update to provide to you all today and that is that South Carolina this week, likely today, is receiving its first shipments of those second doses of the Pfizer vaccine. A total of 16,575 second round doses of vaccine are being directly shipped to facilities this week by the federal government. Facilities will begin to administer these second-round doses to some of those 43,227 Phase 1A individuals who have received their first shot. After receiving their second shot those individuals will be considered fully vaccinated against Covid-19.

As you may remember the Pfizer vaccine requires those two shots that are 21 days apart and it's important for everyone who's able to receive the vaccine to remember that both the Pfizer and the Moderna vaccines each require two shots. So everyone who gets their first shot receives a vaccination card with a reminder of the date that their second shot is due. Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are not to be interchanged. If your first shot was a Pfizer then your second shot needs to be Pfizer and the same with Moderna. Which brand you received for your first dose is written or printed on that vaccination card. We will continue to provide regular updates on the number of Phase 1A individuals who receive their second shots while we continue to wait for the that Covid-19 vaccines to become more widely available for everyone.

We can't stress enough how essential it is for each one of us to continue to practice those daily and even hourly precautions that help protect everyone. We're really, incredibly proud of the actions that South Carolinians have taken thus far in the last year. In the month of December alone here most recently more than 440,000 Covid-19 tests were performed in South Carolina, which is an absolutely amazing number. It is record setting for the number of tests performed in a month in our state.

We encourage everyone to continue to get tested at least monthly but even more frequently if you're regularly out about in the community, and of course to get tested anytime you feel sick even just slightly ill. If a testing site near you has a long line please use our testing locator at scDHEC.gov/Covid19testing to find a nearby, maybe less popular, testing site that might have a shorter wait time. We're continuing to work with our testing partners to make testing as easy, efficient and accessible as possible, as testing is one of the key actions we can take in the ongoing fight against this pandemic.

We're calling on all South Carolinians to ‘step up by stepping back’ until it's your turn to receive the vaccine, and in the interim and even afterwards to continue to take those small steps that make big differences. Wearing your mask when you're around others outside your household or anytime you're in public, physically distancing from anyone outside your household, get tested regularly and when you feel ill. Stay home if you're feeling sick and answer the call if you were to be called, and avoid the large gatherings. Thank you and have a good day. Cristi back to you.

**Cristi More: Thank you Dr. Traxler so our first question is- what percentage of the vaccine has been administered in Phase 1A in South Carolina, and also how many more are expected to be administered by the end of this month?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Currently our utilization rate, the percentage of vaccine that we have received that has been administered, for Pfizer is 38 percent and we have the most knowledge of the Pfizer numbers, because the Moderna is going to the long-term care facility, federal pharmacy partnership. We anticipate receiving that data shortly in the coming days. Certainly our goal is to have as close to 100 utilization as possible as quickly as possible.

**Cristi Moore: What factors would more swiftly facilitate the administration of the vaccine in Phase 1A?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Right now one of the things we need people to do to help speed up the utilization or the administration of the vaccine is for everyone to do their part to lower the spread of this virus, which is at record levels that we haven't seen before in our state, because that will help remove the burden if we are seeing less disease transmission it will help remove the burden from our hospitals and other health care providers that they're currently experiencing, and so that will allow more health care workers to be available to administer vaccines.

**Cristi Moore: It was previously stated by a DHEC representative that Phase 1B would begin a few weeks or a couple of months from mid-December. Given the confusion spurred by the ever-evolving process and Florida's less than smooth rollout, should South Carolinans anticipate Phase 1B to begin in February or March?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We currently anticipate that we'll be able to transition from Phase 1A to Phase 1B in at some point in February.

**Cristi Moore: Has vaccine hesitancy been an issue for Phase 1A?**

**Dr. Traxler:** From what we are hearing, we are not hearing stories of large amounts of vaccine hesitancy. Though I will say that we are hearing some reports of people who are wanting to wait until later in Phase 1A to get vaccinated, to see how others do first. I really want to strongly encourage those those people that might be considering that to go ahead and get vaccinated as soon as it's their turn, because you know we one of the things we will be looking at to move to Phase 1B is appointment rates and utilization rates also of the vaccine. So I would not want somebody to miss out on their turn in Phase 1A because they were delaying it or waiting for a while

**Cristi Moore: What does a Covid related death toll of more than 5,000 South Carolinians mean for our residents?**

**Dr. Traxler:** As we've been saying since the beginning, each one of these cases and especially each one of these deaths is a person, an individual that had a life and that had family and friends in our state, and had an impact on our state. So each one of those more than 5,000 people leaves behind a group of grieving friends and family and their grieving has often in many cases been very different from normal than in the mechanisms because of Covid-19 and maybe not having normal funerals or visitations or just gatherings. Each one is personal to people and each one matters

**Cristi Moore: Thank you Dr. Traxler will there be a residency requirement for the Covid-19 vaccination during Phase 1B in South Carolina? If a person is a permanent resident of another state but lives in South Carolina part-time?**

**Stephen White:** We haven't had any discussions as far as mandating by any means at this point in time. I know we've heard we've heard some things from Fauci and things like that where he feels that there could be mandates in time for specific entities such as hospitals, etc., down the line, but this is all based on the facilities requirements. DHEC is not making any mandatory requirements at this time, we're not putting any residency requirements in place at this time either.

**Cristi Moore: There have been a few concerns related to the home health care providers, nurses, access to the vaccine. Where do home health care workers fall on the vaccine distribution schedule? Are they required to enroll in a program in order to receive the vaccine, and finally if so does DHEC have a list to share of approved home health care provider companies that have enrolled?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Home health care workers and nurses do fall in Phase 1A, along with other health care providers and health care workers. So they are in the current phase. Certainly the home health care agencies may enroll as a provider if they meet the requirements, and especially if they're willing to vaccinate outside of their own staff, but it is not a requirement that that occur for these individual workers to be vaccinated. We are working on a website where health care workers who have not been contacted by their employer or by a hospital can sign up to receive notification when there is a vaccine provider site in their vicinity in their community, so that they can register to go get vaccinated. That would certainly be open to home healthcare workers and nurses just as it would other people in Phase 1A.

**Cristi Moore: Perfect. What if anything can DHEC share about recruitment efforts for vaccine staff?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I think that the main thing right now is that we all recognize that there are strains being put on our health care systems and facilities and providers and workers, when we're having as many severe cases as we are in the state. The biggest way that we can recruit vaccine providers, vaccine staff is by doing our part to stop transmission so that we can take that burden off of the health care facilities and providers and that will free up staff to be able to help provide vaccination

**Cristi Moore: Will DHEC establish vaccine distribution centers like the vaccine testing sites?**

**Dr. Traxler:** That is something that we are certainly looking at, though the logistical complexities that go along with these vaccines at the moment do make that more challenging than even for the testing. However it's not something I’m ruling out, and we are certainly exploring it as well as many other avenues for providing the vaccine to the communities.

**Cristi Moore: Specifically, how will people who qualify for vaccination in the various stages be notified- will they sign up first or await notification?**

**Dr. Traxler:** The main thing right now is to await notification. As I mentioned a couple of questions ago, Phase 1A providers and workers who are in care will be contacted probably through their licensing entities or associations when they can sign up through our website to be notified when there is a provider site near them. As we get into further Phases we will be broadcasting the message and so many people who might not need proof from an employer or whatnot will be able to just follow the instructions that DHEC provides, through briefings such as this and press releases on our website. Other folks may be notified by their employer. The main thing is just to wait until you receive notification directly from your employer or overarching employment entity, or DHEC.

**Cristi Moore: Neighboring states are also moving to Phase 1B, why is DHEC waiting on late winter or the 70 percent distribution in order to move forward in our Phases?**

**Dr. Traxler:** DHEC is following that original advice from CDC where you want to really criteria to have been met before you move on to Phase 1B, and one of those is that there's 70 percent of the people in Phase 1A have been vaccinated or offered vaccination. The other is that you want to see the supply surpassing the demand. I would say basically if we start seeing appointments dropping off significantly at these provider sites, as well as seeing that greater than 70 percent, then along with CDC's guidance we would then proceed into forward into 1B. We still only have a certain amount of vaccine that we are getting each week, and that does not increase even if we move into another phase. So when we are told by the federal government that will receive a certain amount, as I said, going into Phase 1B early just means that there will be even more people trying to get those same limited doses, and we want those limited doses really going to those frontline healthcare workers who are helping to save lives and to those most vulnerable among us in the nursing homes before we begin vaccinating out further.

**Cristi Moore: Have there been any additions or omissions of those who will be included in the next phase, which is Phase 1B, since we've done the briefings over the course of this weekend.**

**Dr. Traxler:** There have not been any additions or omissions or changes, however, as with many things with Covid-19, all of these plans and such remain flexible, and so we will certainly be adapting if the vaccine advisory group for our state were to come back with some additional or different recommendations.

**Cristi Moore: This is sort of a follow-up, but when Phase 1B does begin, does the plan or implementation differ by county?**

**Dr. Traxler**: No, it will not differ by county. The plan for implementation will be the same statewide, however we will be taking extra steps to really make certain that the access and availability is present in those rural or underserved counties as it is in the more accessible counties.

**Cristi Moore: When will Phase IV begin, where the general public is slated to receive the vaccine?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I’m not certain about a Phase IV I do know that the numbering of these Phases has changed as things have progressed and as the guidance from the federal government, from the CDC and the ACIP committee have changed. The numbers have changed at times too, but regardless of what number it is, the phase that includes the general population and the vast majority of people we do expect to begin in late spring and continue into summer and even into early fall in South Carolina.

**Cristi Moore:** **There appears to be a delay in South Carolinians receiving the vaccine, to what do you attribute this delay? Would it be the shortage of health care professionals to administer it a lack of coordination or hesitancy?**

**Dr. Traxler:** This vaccine is just like everything else with this pandemic- a little unprecedented. It's the first ultra-cold frozen requirement vaccine that we have used routinely in the United States or at all. That does provide those logistical complexities, and we also were looking to do it on a massive scale that is certainly planned for and exercised, but is rarely actually having to be implemented. So I think combining that complex vaccine and the requirements that go into it into plans to roll out the vaccines to millions and millions of people as absolutely fast as we can, it just takes a couple or a few weeks to get into a smooth rhythm and cadence. I fully anticipate that in the next couple weeks we will see the vaccine utilization rates really significantly increasing as we get into that familiar cadence.

**Cristi Moore: Studies suggest that the efficacy of the Moderna vaccine among people between the ages of 18 and 55 is high even when patients receive only half the prescribed dose. How likely is it that South Carolina will split doses to provide immunity to more people quicker?**

**Dr. Traxler:** At this time, we are not having discussions of that, however we are reviewing the data and we will be monitoring and going along with what the CDC and ACIP recommends. So again, I cannot rule anything out for the future, but it is not something that I anticipate- certainly not in the near future and I don't really anticipate at this time.

 **Cristi Moore: Has the local fatigue generated by repeated warnings about Covid-19 contributed to a perceived or actual national ineffectiveness of the vaccine rollout thus far?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I don't think that it has made a significant impact, except for whatever reason there being more transmission of the virus, be it due to Covid fatigue or other reasons that people are just not doing as much of those protective actions that we always talk about. The mask wearing, avoiding gatherings, physical distancing. There's less of that likely going on which is what's causing this increased disease transmission. We're seeing a lot more sick people and it really is putting that burden and strain on our health care systems and facilities, and so that in turn takes away staffing and resources from those entities being able to focus on vaccination efforts. They are doing a fabulous job doing both at once, but certainly if there were fewer people were getting sick from Covid-19 and having to be admitted and taken care of for critical illnesses, then that would be more energy and attention that could be focused on vaccination roll out.

**Cristi Moore: Has DHEC observed a second dose being held for those who have already received the vaccine, as outlined in the plan?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We have not observed, that I am aware of, any facilities in South Carolina that received doses from us holding back first doses to use as second doses. The only second doses are the ones coming from the federal government, which are starting to arrive today in this week.

**Cristi Moore: Should there be a concern about hospital capacity as the case numbers continue to climb- for instance staffing shortages statewide? How concerned are we about that?**

**Dr. Traxler:** That is something that does concern me significantly, especially in the areas of our state that are the hardest hit, that are seeing the highest hospitalization rate and ICU and ventilator usage rates. We are seeing a significant strain on a number of these hospital systems and that does then lead to potential staffing shortages, especially when you're trying to do a massive vaccine vaccination campaign at the same time. But it also is that many people that are sick and that are really competing for those resources and staffing, when they all need them, and so this is why it's so important for us to certainly step up and get vaccinated when it's your turn. But until it's your turn, to stay committed to the cause and wear your mask, avoid gatherings, do physical distancing when you're out in public or around people outside your household.

**Cristi Moore: What advice do you have for independent health care practitioners or the self-employed who are part of group 1A and have not yet been contacted by DHEC to receive the vaccination?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We have issued clarified guidance to the hospitals and hospital systems so that everyone understands that they can vaccinate Phase 1A members that are in their community if they have the capacity and vaccine to do so. In addition, as I mentioned earlier, we are going to be sending messages out to Phase 1A members again through likely their licensing entities or their associations with a website where they can sign up for DHEC, and then they will be notified when there's a vaccination site near them for the so that they can make an appointment. We anticipate that coming out in the next couple of days.

**Cristi Moore: This one might be a good one for Stephen- does the tracking of vaccine waste in VAMS include vaccine that has expired? This is a three-part. If doses are close to expiring, what can DHEC and providers do to ensure that those doses are administered, and lastly will DHEC consider reallocating those doses for individuals outside of Phase 1A?**

**Stephen White:** Tracking system in VAMS does include vaccination that's wasted or expired, that does have that information in there. As far as the information related to doses that are expiring and what DHEC or the providers can do- obviously we're continuing to monitor the doses that sites have at their locations prior to sending out any additional vaccines to a specific location, and we always want to ensure just like we do with routine vaccines. Use the oldest vaccines and rotate your stocks as you get your new stocks in, you rotate those to the back of the system. We deal with those again on a routine basis with regular vaccines. As far as DHEC reconsider, or would we consider, I think you asked about reallocating doses to individuals outside of Phase 1A? No, not at this time those vaccines are in those in those facilities and they are to vaccinate the healthcare workers and or other healthcare workers that they've been allocated doses.

**Cristi Moore: Thanks Stephen. If DHEC were to become aware of any instances in which someone in Phase 1A has gotten the vaccine out of order, in essence tried to jump the line, to receive the vaccine how would DHEC respond, and also what happens to the administrator of the vaccine and the person who gets it if they jump out of line?**

**Dr. Traxler:** If DHEC were to learn about a situation where the guidance was not being followed when it came to which members of the public or which individuals should be getting vaccinated at that time, we would provide re-education. We would contact the vaccine provider and make sure that they understand what phase the state is currently in, and who all the members of that phase are and the importance of following that guidance.

**Cristi Moore: What does the timeline released by DHEC last Thursday mean for spring festivals and sports, the summer tourism season, and even fall sports if the general public won't be able to get vaccinated until summer or fall? Does that mean the advice on restrictions will continue to be against large gatherings through this year? And lastly how possible is it that the timeline could change if the vaccine administration rate improves, and what's needed for that to occur?**

**Dr. Traxler:** The advice regarding know large gatherings or gathering together in large groups is going to be based not only on the vaccination rate that we're seeing in the state, but also in the actual disease transmission rate. I would say that that is just as much, if not more important, when it comes to some of this guidance on what our behaviors are like in public. That is something that, outside of waiting their turn and stepping up when it is their turn, people can do. And as for vaccination people can do while they wait and that still doing those things like wearing a mask if you go out in public, if you're around other people, if you're at a gathering make sure you're wearing your mask and you're doing that physical distancing. And really avoiding, right now when we're in this significant increase in cases, avoid those large groups. If we can get the numbers down to much more reasonable levels, combined with increasing vaccination rates, then I think the advice regarding large gatherings would begin to evolve and change.

**Cristi Moore: It appears that DHEC calculates its vaccination rate on Pfizer's vaccine alone, why is that? Also, according to DHEC’s release last Tuesday, South Carolina had received nearly 197 doses in total. That would be 112,125 of Pfizer and 84,500 of Moderna, but Wednesday's release which gave a 31 percent rate, was based solely on Pfizer's 112,125 as the denominator. Similarly, the vaccine allocation webpage that says it's current as of yesterday, which gives a 38 percent utilization rate, is based only on the allocation from Pfizer. Is DHEC tracking allocations of Moderna vaccine? If not, why, and will DHEC do so in the future?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Right now we are calculating it based on the Pfizer because that is what we have the data for. The Moderna doses so far for South Carolina have gone to that long-term care facility federal pharmacy partnership, and we are working to get that information and those doses administered and up-to-date numbers on those from the federal government and the pharmacies, and anticipate that we will have that information to begin sharing in the next couple of days. I suspect at that time we'll look at potentially combining the two and certainly as we start administering Moderna doses to people outside long-term care facilities, then we will be including those on the utilization rate

**Cristi Moore:** Thank you Dr. Traxler, just wanted to remind folks that we are going to continue this conversation. Until next time we plan to continue to hold these regular media briefings and we do appreciate the partnership with our media partners to really learn about where we are with vaccine here in South Carolina. Thank you for your willingness to submit questions ahead of time so that we could answer as many as possible. I did just want to mention that our daily web update has just gone live online, and our vaccination allocation data for today will be up online here shortly in the next hour or so. Again, just want to thank you for joining and until next time stay healthy.