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Lincoln Journal Star

Online town halls planned in Lincoln, elsewhere to educate people of color about COVID-19 vaccine

By Matt Olberding

In an effort to answer questions and assuage fears about the COVID-19 vaccine among communities of color, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services is partnering with several organizations to hold online town halls over the next several months.

The first two will be focused on Lincoln. The first is set for Wednesday at 7 p.m. and is being done in concert with Mount Zion Baptist Church.

The second one is scheduled for Feb. 18 in cooperation with the Lincoln Chapter of the NAACP.

The Rev. Tremaine Combs, senior pastor at Mount Zion, said he is not trying to push the vaccine on anyone but wants to offer a venue where people can get information in a comfortable and empowering setting.

"The goal is to provide an opportunity and a space for people to ask questions," he said.

Combs said it's also an opportunity for public health officials to "rebuild trust" with the Black community.

A third Lincoln-focused event will be Feb. 25 in partnership with Bluestem Health and the New Era Baptist State Convention of Nebraska.

An Omaha event is set for Feb. 23, and there is one scheduled March 13 with the Grand Island Multicultural Coalition.

Dannette Smith, CEO of the Department of Health and Human Services, said many of the town halls are meant to coincide with Black History Month in February.

"I'm looking forward to all these town hall meetings as a way to talk about equity, as a way to talk about the impact of health care on people of color throughout Nebraska," Smith said during a Facebook Live session Thursday.

The town halls will be an opportunity to answer questions and educate people in vulnerable communities about why they should get vaccinated.

"There is some hesitancy to taking the vaccine, and we understand for the minority community that sometimes that can be very difficult," she said.

Smith, who is Black, noted that she grew up with "folklore" regarding health care and medicine, and one of the goals of the town halls is to "decrease some of that folklore stuff" for communities of color and "give you real-time information that makes sense about why you need to take the vaccine."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Blacks and Hispanics are both about four times as likely as whites to be hospitalized if they contract a COVID-19 infection, and nearly three times as likely to die.

Despite those figures, surveys have found that only about a quarter of Black Americans and about one-third of the Latino community say they plan to get the vaccine.

Brad Meyer, CEO of Bluestem Health, said about 45% of the organization's patients speak a first language that's not English, making communication sometimes difficult.

He also said that some of the groups it serves have skeptical views of Western medicine, and he's heard anecdotal evidence that there are many people who don't plan to get vaccinated.

"Our goal is to break down these preconceived notions and try to answer any questions as to why they feel it's not safe to get the vaccine," Meyer said.

Smith said that once more vaccine is available, the state will work with community partners to ensure those who are most vulnerable and most in need of it have access.

The Department of Health and Human Services said late Wednesday that it is getting an additional boost in vaccine supply. Last week, officials said the state would be getting about 16% more vaccine doses for the next several weeks, but in a news release, the department said it is receiving 21% more this week, for a total of 30,125 first doses of Pfizer and Moderna vaccine and 25,825 second doses.

It said it also will be receiving an additional 17,500 doses of Pfizer vaccines over the next couple of weeks that were overallocated to the Federal Pharmacy Program.

As of Thursday, about 134,000 people had signed up on the state's vaccine registration website.

Nebraska so far has been allocated just over 300,000 vaccine doses and had administered 207,000 of them as of Wednesday, a nearly 70% rate. However, out of the roughly 207,000 doses that the Department of Health and Human Services has control of, the vaccination rate is closer to 80%, with 90% of all first doses administered so far.

"We are moving as fast as we possibly can," Smith said.

TOP

KETV

State, local leaders urge minority groups to get COVID-19 vaccine (video)

By Waverle Monroe

OMAHA, Neb. —

Nebraska's state and local officials have said they realize there is a hesitancy when it comes to minorities getting the COVID-19 vaccine. On the state level, DHHS CEO Danette Smith said they've been talking with different communities to figure out its needs.

Local leaders like Preston Love, Jr. said that trust comes from the leaders within the community.

Love proudly displayed his vaccine sticker Thursday after getting his first dose of the Moderna vaccine.

"I must say I kept asking her when she was going to finish and she already finished so it was easy," Love said.

Not only did Love say he didn't feel it, but he also said he's feeling fine.

"I did not want it. I needed it," Love said.

"I did not want it. I needed it," Love said.

Love is well-known in the Black community and said he's using his position to encourage his community to get vaccinated. Love said. that involves breaking down a lot of historical barriers.

"Tuskegee, polio tests even the Flint water, all of that adds up to distrust," Love said.

Love got his vaccine at Charles Drew Health Center.

"Far too often in the Black community, health care is being dictated to them. We're being told to do, what you should be doing," Charles Drew Health Center CEO Kenny McMorris said.

McMorris said there's been a steady flow of patients coming to get the shot.

"We currently have about 250 vaccines a week," McMorris said.

McMorris said Charles Drew is connecting with clergy to grassroots organizations to educate people about the vaccine. Both Love and McMorris say it's a community approach.

"It cannot be forced on. It cannot be advertised on. It cannot be brochured upon," Love said.

"Our traditional means of leveraging technology and social media, not everybody uses that," McMorris said. "So, how do we change and make sure we are providing resources and support that meets people where they are."

Charles Drew Health Center is one of several Federally Qualified Health Centers in Nebraska, giving vaccines to only its patients.

The state urges people to continue to register for the vaccine vaccinate.ne.gov.

TOP

NTV

Nebraska lays out plan to encourage minorities to get COVID vaccine (video)

By Shirelle Moore

OMAHA, Neb. (FOX 42 KPTM) — Nebraska health officials have a new plan to get more minorities to get the COVID vaccine.

They're especially hoping to reach those who may not normally trust vaccines.

Health officials with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in Nebraska held a meeting Thursday to discuss the health disparities in communities of color and what we can do to fix them.

"I kept asking her when she was going to be and had already finished so it was easy," says Preston Love Jr.

Love Jr. Just received his first coronavirus shot.

He says he took it because it was his turn and he wanted to set an example for people in the black community who may be hesitant.

He says, "Because of long term things where we have been manipulated and have not been given straight-forward information, lots of things which I'm not going over that make us reluctant. I acknowledge that reluctance."

Love jr. says he trusts the science and health experts with the DHHS says what he's doing is important.

It's setting an example and getting someone trusted to talk to their family and friends about how the vaccine safe.

"If you're a person of color if we could start to decrease some of that folklore stuff and give you real-time information that makes sense about why you need to take the vaccination because as I said, even for myself, this is a life or death situation," says Dannette Smith, the CEO of DHHS.

Another issue facing minority communities that might stop them from getting the vaccine: a language barrier.

DHHS is working to fix that by providing interpreters at vaccine sites and assuring all forms also come in different languages.

Health experts say they also encourage everyone to fill out their demographic information.

That information helps DHHS find out which group it needs to focus on when it comes to funding and messaging.

"As we move forward as a state and especially at DHHS it's even collecting more demographic data. As I mentioned disability data, information for housing, depending on if people have transportation. That has really impacted individuals too because if you're not able to go to a testing site or somewhere to get tested, you probably aren't going to get it," says Josie Rodriguez, health equity administrator for DHHS.

Health officials with DHHS will be hosting town halls all over Nebraska to help answer any questions people in those groups might have.

The town halls will all be held virtually. Everyone is encouraged to participate online.

Dates are as follows:

- February 10th- Co-hosted with Mount Zion Baptist Church in Lincoln
- February 18th- Co-hosted with NAACP Lincoln Chapter
- February 23rd- Co-hosted with 4Urban.org and Charles Drew Center of Omaha
- February 25th- Co-hosted with Blue String Lincoln and New Era Baptist State Convention of Nebraska
- March 13th- Co-hosted with Multicultural coalition in Grand Island

More information can be found here.

TOP

WJAG

Neb. DHHS to soon host informational town halls about COVID-19 vaccine

By Cody Ronnfeldt

LINCOLN - Ethnic minorities in Nebraska have been significantly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic and as the COVID-19 vaccine becomes more widely available, it's important they also have the opportunity to get vaccinated.

The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services talked about its vaccine minority outreach strategy during a press conference Thursday.

Health Disparities and Health Equity Administrator Josie Rodriquez said although Hispanics only make up ten percent of Nebraska's population, 48 percent of them had COVID-19 during the heat of the pandemic.

CEO Dannette Smith said one of the ways they're going to try and get the word out about vaccines for minority populations is through town hall meetings across the state.

"We want to educate, educate, educate about the vaccine. There is some hesitancy about taking the vaccine and we understand for the minority community that sometimes that can be very difficult. We want these town hall meetings to be interactive and people can feel free to ask us questions and find out where they can go to get vaccinated."

Rodriquez also said they're working to get the vaccine registration portal available in Spanish which should be done in a couple of weeks.

TOP

KLKN

VIDEO: Health professionals discuss minority outreach for COVID-19 vaccine

By Ashley Springman

LINCOLN, Neb. (KLKN) — The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) holds a Facebook Live event addressing the state's vaccine distribution, as a part of an ongoing series.

DHHS CEO Dannette R. Smith and Office of Health Disparities and Health Equity Administrator Josie Rodriguez will be discussing DHHS's minority outreach regarding the vaccine.

Within the last seven-days, about 134,000 people have registered for the vaccine through DHHS's website.

After reviewing their research, DHHS says it's time to focus on minority populations.

DHHS's research shows that "racial-ethnic minority populations were being very much impacted by this virus," as stated by Rodriguez.

Nebraska's Hispanic population is about 10% of the state, Rodriguez said "we saw high numbers in positivity rates, 48% Hispanics at the time."

According to DHHS's COVID-19 Vaccinations Dashboard, out of the 149,087 first vaccine doses given only 3.3% identified as Hispanic, 2.5% African American, 1.5% Asian, and 0.4% Native American.

"These are things that we really need to pay attention to," commented Smith. "And we are starting to do that, not just with the racial-ethnic minority population but all other at-risk population of those that are disabled, blind, hard of hearing."

They are working to support non-English speaking residents. A Spanish registration portal should be live in the next few weeks.

DHHS will also be partnering with community organizations across Nebraska to provide virtual townhalls concerning the COVID-19 vaccine.

Upcoming events include:

- Mount Zion Baptist Church, Lincoln on Feb. 10
- NAACP, Lincoln on Feb. 18
- Urban.org with the Charles Drew Center, Omaha on Feb. 23
- Multicultural Coalition, Grand Island on Mar. 13

Times have yet to be released.

TOP

AP News

Nebraska will receive 21% more vaccine doses this week

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska will receive 21% more doses of coronavirus vaccines this week as the state continues to work to speed up distribution of the shots.

The state said it is scheduled to receive 55,950 doses of the vaccines this week. That is up from 46,400 a week ago.

The increase in doses should help boost distribution of the vaccine statewide. The 19 local health districts across Nebraska are finishing up the first phase of the campaign when health care workers and residents of long-term care facilities were the focus, and now they are all starting to vaccinate people 65 and older and some essential workers.

“We are moving as fast as we possibly can. As we get it from the federal government, we are getting it out to our partners so that people can be inoculated as soon as possible,” said Dannette Smith, CEO of the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

State officials are planning to hold a series of online town hall meetings over the next month to answer questions about the vaccines and the virus.

The state said 3.9% of the state’s population has now received both required doses of one of the two vaccines. Nebraska has administered 207,111 of the 300,400 doses it has been allocated so far, including 9,027 that were administered Wednesday.

Less than a week after the state launched its new vaccinate.ne.gov website, nearly 141,000 people have registered to be notified when they are eligible to get the vaccine.

The number of people hospitalized with the coronavirus declined Wednesday to 278 from Tuesday’s 305. That total has fallen steadily since the November peak of 987.

The seven-day rolling average of daily new cases in Nebraska decreased over the past two weeks, going from 806.86 new cases per day on Jan. 20 to 560 new cases per day on Wednesday. The state said 192,549 virus cases and 1,952 deaths have been reported in the state since the pandemic began.

TOP

Omaha World Herald

Nebraska participating in both federal COVID vaccination programs involving pharmacies

By Julie Anderson

Nebraska is participating in both of the available federal programs created to send COVID-19 vaccines to pharmacies in the state, health officials said Thursday.

Pharmacies participating in the first program, dubbed the Federal Pharmacy Program, already have vaccinated many residents and staff of Nebraska's long-term care facilities.

Allocations were made through the program over a six-week period, including four weeks of 11,700 first doses of the Pfizer vaccine between Dec. 20 and Jan. 16, and four weeks of 11,700 second doses of Pfizer vaccine between Jan. 3 and Jan. 30, health officials said.

Allocations required for the program were determined by the federal government.

Now that participating pharmacies have completed all first-dose clinics at the facilities and multiple second-dose clinics, the pharmacies have begun tallying how many doses they have left over, Khalilah LeGrand, a spokeswoman for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, said in an email.

Pharmacy chain CVS is returning 5,850 doses to the state this week, and Walgreens will return 11,700 doses over the next two weeks. The doses will be used to vaccinate people in the state's Phase 1B category, which includes people ages 65 and older, younger people with high-risk medical conditions and certain front-line workers who can't work from home.

State health officials have said the leftover doses, like others the state receives, will be allocated within the state according to population.

Some observers have criticized the state, suggesting that officials have opted out of some federal programs that could bring more vaccine to Nebraska.

Douglas County received some of the leftover doses this week, Adi Pour, director of the Douglas County Health Department, said earlier this week.

Iowa health officials announced Wednesday that the state was making doses left over from the long-term care initiative available to approximately 32,000 Iowans ages 65 and older. The doses, a one-time additional allocation, were distributed to a limited number of Walgreens and CVS stores in the state and will be available by appointment. In western Iowa, appointments were made available at some Walgreens locations in Pottawattamie and Woodbury Counties.

LeGrand said Nebraska also is participating in the separate federal Retail Pharmacy Program. State officials are waiting for information from the federal government about what the allocation will be through that program. The program will bring additional doses to the state.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Retail Pharmacy Program is a collaboration with 21 national pharmacy partners and independent pharmacy networks. In Nebraska, pharmacy partners include Walmart and several pharmacy networks and suppliers.

The program, according to CDC, is being implemented incrementally based on available vaccine supply. As vaccine supply increases over time, the program ultimately will expand to include more than 40,000 pharmacies.

State health officials have said the state does not plan to ask the Federal Emergency Management Agency to provide a vaccination site in Nebraska because it would not bring additional allocations of vaccine into the state and the state is doing well with the number of vaccination sites currently in operation.

The state health department reported Wednesday that the state is receiving 30,125 first doses of vaccine this week and 25,825 second doses.

Dannette Smith, the health department's CEO, said Thursday that the state will hold town hall meetings across the state in the coming weeks to provide education about vaccines.

During the seven days ending Thursday, Smith said, more than 134,000 Nebraskans had registered for the vaccine through the state's vaccination portal, vaccinate.ne.gov.

TOP

10/11 Now

Nebraska pharmacies to receive COVID vaccines directly from federal government (video)

By Jared Austin

LINCOLN, Neb. (KOLN) - The federal government is starting a new vaccine program where vaccines could be administered at local pharmacies. The Federal Retail Pharmacy Program will ship COVID-19 vaccines directly from the federal government to local pharmacies.

State officials said this will lead to a great partnership and help increase vaccine allocation to the state.

Even though this program hasn't started in Nebraska, the number of vaccines the state receives weekly continues to rise. State officials said there's now a 21% increase from last week.

Nebraska DHHS CEO Dannette Smith said, "We are moving as fast as possible as we can. as we get it from the federal government, we're getting it out to our partners."

This week, the state will get over 55,000 vaccines compared to just over 46,000 last week.

Nebraska Pharmacists Association CEO Marcia Mueting said this new vaccine program will eventually lead to more vaccines coming to Nebraska weekly.

"The pharmacies will be able to immunize quicker instead of having it go to the state distribution hub and then to pharmacies," Mueting said.

According to the CDC, pharmacies involved with this program include Walmart, Good Neighbor

Pharmacy and Cardinal Health.

Walmart said on its website as soon as it receives vaccines from the federal government, it'll vaccinate people in 38 states including Nebraska.

Mueting said, "Ultimately this program will expand to include over 40,000 pharmacies across the country."

Mueting said pharmacists are more than qualified to administer these vaccines and they know the patient population they'll vaccinate.

"The pharmacies across Nebraska have been standing at the ready waiting for their cue to jump in and become a part of the solution," Mueting said.

Nebraska DHHS said this program will start in the state once it receives more info on allocations.

The Nebraska Pharmacists Association is confident this program will continue increasing vaccine allocation in the state once implemented. The program is set to start next week in other states but it's still unclear when it'll start here in Nebraska.

TOP

KETV

Nebraska will participate in Federal Pharmacy program (video)

By Andrew Ozaki

Nebraska will be part of the Federal Pharmacy program according to the state's top health officials overseeing the pandemic response.

"We don't have the exact numbers for the facilities receiving it, but it will start next week," Department of Health and Human Services Incident Commander Angie Ling said.

On Thursday, Ling and Chief Medical officer Dr. Gary Anthone told lawmakers in the Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee, the vaccines will be in addition to the doses already allocated to the state.

"Our recommended partners are ABC, Cardinal and Walmart and ABC and Cardinal are like over-arching distributors and then they will have smaller pharmacies under them," Ling said.

She said that 88% of Nebraskans live within 15 miles of those pharmacies.

"So that's going to be some really good coverage," Ling said.

In addition, she said local health agencies need to be prepared to ramp up capacity to give doses in

the following weeks.

"Everyone is supposed to be planning right now for double and triple," Ling said.

Dr. Anthone said the Federal government is telling them they expect to distribute enough doses by the end of June to vaccinate 300 million Americans.

On Thursday, Johnson and Johnson submitted its single-dose COVID-19 vaccine to the FDA for emergency approval.

That could mean the company is just weeks away from adding 100 million doses by July.

"During the planning, it's all about scalability. We want you to be able to scale up and scale up like that," Ling said.

Ling told senators she believes local health departments can handle the increase. She said some agencies are planning to add more vaccination sites, operate clinics more days and for longer hours.

There is also a possibility of using TestNebraska sites as well.

Ling is concerned if there will be enough vaccinators.

"Right now a lot of people are volunteering and in four weeks from now they might not be able to volunteer so much," Ling said.

State Sen. Lynne Walz said she happy it could mean essential workers such as teachers could soon get vaccinated.

"I really appreciate the fact they are setting themselves up to increase and expand those vaccinations as they need to," Walz said.

Nebraska will get around 56,000 doses this week.

Officials said that a 21% increase should help boost distribution statewide.

The goal is to get doses into arms within a week of them being delivered to local health facilities.

Nebraska reports more than 207,000 people have been vaccinated for COVID-19.

Around 149,000 are first doses.

Nearly 4% of Nebraskans over the age of 16 have received the vaccine.

In Iowa more than 289,000 people have been vaccinated.

About 141,000 are have received their first dose.

TOP

KETV

Corrections, courts make plea to state leaders to move up in vaccination line

By Sarah Fili

DOUGLAS COUNTY, Neb. —
Corrections officials and courthouse employees are urging to the state to consider moving them up the vaccine line.

Douglas County corrections director Michael Myers said cells are hard to come by in the jail right now.

“There’s times where we've had to house people in our gymnasiums to make room for people,” he said.

Myers said because more serious felony cases are awaiting trial, they're moving people to places they've never had to before.

"What we've seen is, those serious violent cases start stacking up in the jail which is causing us to be short on bed space that's acceptable," he said.

Myers says violent offenders must be housed in cells, and not general population, which makes finding bed space a puzzle.

“We had 20 people sleeping in our court holding, (to make room in cells) which is something that's pretty much unprecedented for us,” Myers said.

Myers is pleading with the state to move all corrections staff and inmates up in the vaccination line, so courts can resume, which would move inmates out of the jail.

"As we wait for those (vaccine) opportunities to happen, crimes are still being committed,” he said.

"The key to their (the courts) return to full functionality, to these higher-level cases that have been delayed, is the vaccination of their staff, and defendants,” Myers said.

“We’ll probably all be vaccinated, be getting our first doses in April, second doses in May, and the courts are behind us,” he said.

Douglas County Deputy Attorney Brenda Beadle has the same plea to the state.

"Please let us move up on the vaccination list,” she said.

That's because the courts are opening, vaccine or not, and with a monumental goal. The courts scheduled 83 trials for March.

"Now we're in a position where we have to prep for 83 jury trials, very serious trials. We have to bring witnesses in, we're doing depositions," she said.

Beadle said that forced the prosecutor's office to throw their safety protocols out to prepare. She said masks will be worn in the office, but they want to be vaccinated.

Judges explained to Beadle that the trials are stacked, meaning they can move from one to the next if something comes up. Beadle said that doesn't alleviate the workload, because attorneys will have to be prepared in case any docket is called.

"We had to bring everybody back. Which, we had been doing two weeks on, two weeks off (out of the office) and that was working well, but we didn't have a choice because we had to get ready for 83 jury trials," she said.

Beadle said between prosecutors and public defenders, they'd need about 200 vaccines. She understands the state's prioritization but hopes courts will be moved up in the list.

"We are frontline, and we are going to have to be in the courtroom dealing with the public, we have over 1000 people coming into the courthouse monthly," she said.

Beadle said prosecutors will begin preparing, but the caseload is overwhelming to juggle. Plus, there's the threat of the virus shutting things down.

"We're going to roll up our sleeved and get to work. We'll see if we can get through any without any continuances or mistrials because of COVID," she said.

Both corrections and the courts are hopeful the state will hear their plea.

TOP

KLKN

Vaccine supply not keeping pace with demand in Lincoln's neighboring counties (video)

By Yousef Nasser

LINCOLN, Neb. (KLKN) – In Lancaster County, there is substantial demand for the COVID-19 vaccine. The same is true in rural counties surrounding the Capital City.

Health officials from the Four Corners Health Department in York and Public Health Solutions in Crete tell Channel 8 the demand for the vaccine is intense. Both health districts are receiving between 600 and 800 primary doses a week. But do they have enough supply to meet the demand?

“No, we don’t,” Four Corners executive director Laura McDougall said. “We have 7000 people on a waiting list. Logistically, right now what we’re doing is when we receive vaccines we set up times to give them. So it’s just a constant rolling out of vaccine.”

“This is not a distribution problem,” Public Health Solutions health director Kim Showalter said. “This is a supply problem. And there’s nothing any of us can do about that.”

Four Corners serves Butler, Polk, Seward, and York counties, while Public Health Solutions serves Fillmore, Gage, Jefferson, Thayer, and Saline counties. Both districts began vaccinating people in the Phase 1B group last week.

“Our rural counties, we have a lot more people in that age group,” McDougall said. “So I think it’s good that we’re able to go ahead and have been in the 1B for about a week now.”

They distribute vaccine through a select group of approved health care providers within the district, with at least one in each county.

“We felt that the best place for someone in that 75+ to 85+ age range to get a vaccine is at their provider,” Showalter said.

Rural health departments are committed to making sure that everyone who wants to get the vaccine is able to get it, but officials say it will take time.

“I want everyone to know, please be patient because we are going to get to everyone, but it is going to take a while with the amount of vaccine we have coming in each week,” Showalter said.

“In my entire career in public health, I’ve never seen such a concerted effort as I do right now with all of our medical partners working together,” McDougall said. “It’s a lot of teamwork, good teamwork going on.”

People in the 65 and older group can register online with their respective health departments to set up a vaccination appointment:

–Four Corners Health Department

–Public Health Solutions

They can also call the Nebraska State Vaccine Hotline using the phone numbers 531-249-1873 or 833-998-2275

TOP

Grand Island Independent

1,000 seniors vaccinated at Fonner Park drive-thru clinic

By Jeff Bahr

On Thursday morning, 1.4 inches of snow wasn't enough to keep 1,000 senior citizens from getting their initial COVID-19 vaccinations at Fonner Park.

The shots were administered in drive-thru fashion inside the sheep barn at Fonner Park. The recipients first pulled into the Tom Dinsdale Automotive Cattle Barn to get registered. They then circled around to get their vaccinations inside the sheep barn.

Most of the recipients were 80 and older, and they were happy to be vaccinated.

"Damn right," A.J. Haller said after he got his shot. The 82-year-old Grand Island man hasn't had COVID-19. His wife, Brenda, registered for him two or three weeks ago, and they got a call this week telling him when to show up.

His wife hasn't had her turn yet. "She's only 68," Haller said.

Keith and Carol Haussler, who live north of Juniata, were also pleased to get their vaccinations.

Carol, 79, contracted COVID-19 in November. The symptoms never got too bad, but she was cold and tired for a week. She also didn't eat much because she was afraid food might make her sick.

Keith, 77, slept in his shop while his wife had the virus, checking on her two or three times a day. He was comfortable in the shop with a recliner and a wood stove.

Why didn't he get the virus himself? "Blind luck," he said.

Recipients said the vaccinations didn't hurt. "I didn't even scream," Keith said.

To celebrate the occasion, the Hausslers headed for Olive Garden after their vaccinations.

Another happy recipient was Gwen Hassler of Grand Island. "I think it's a great thing," she said.

Hassler, 82, registered about three weeks ago. "And then my daughter did it again for me. And I think that helped me," she said.

Hassler never got COVID-19. "I'm very good about staying home," she said.

She has a cat named Toby. "And the two of us stay home all day," she said. "I go to the grocery store and to church. That's about all I do."

Every once in a while, her son-in-law comes in from York to take her to a restaurant.

The senior citizens were glad to get their shots. "They're very happy people coming through," said

Teresa Anderson of the Central District Health Department.

The vaccination clinic was put together by CDHD in partnership with Fonner Park and CHI Health St. Francis.

Initially, organizers planned to hold the clinic in one building, but, on Wednesday, Fonner Park "generously offered us" the second barn as well, Anderson said.

The two buildings provided plenty of room for social distancing. The indoor locations also allowed the staff and volunteers to "stay somewhat warm," Anderson said.

CDHD has set up a tent in its parking lot for both testing and vaccinations. But Fonner Park provides much more space.

There was no way 1,000 doses could be administered in one day "on our campus," Anderson said.

The seniors got their first doses at Thursday's clinic, which was by appointment only. They'll get their second shots in three weeks.

Plenty of people were on hand to help in the two barns. Five or six nurses from CHI St. Francis were joined by nurses from Central District Health, representatives of Wood River Fire and Rescue, the Grand Island Fire Department and the Community Emergency Response Team. Some of the people helping were volunteering their time.

Jon Rosenlund, director of emergency management for Grand Island and Hall County, welcomed drivers as they pulled into the cattle barn.

Nick Lammers of Wood River Fire and Rescue said giving people vaccinations now will help his department later. Since March, Wood River emergency personnel have taken some COVID-19 patients to the hospital. "We've had our share," Lammers said.

Lammers, who's a paramedic, was giving shots Thursday. Also on hand from Wood River Fire and Rescue was Judy Knecht, an EMT. One of the St. Francis nurses was Vicky English.

The clinic started at 8:30 a.m. and finished by 3:30 p.m.

How quickly did cars cruise through the barns? By 11:30 a.m., 350 people had been vaccinated.

Nurses were reconstituting the Pfizer vaccine in the birthing pavilion inside the sheep barn. Working in the warmer environment helped them with their manual dexterity. They filled syringes after a sterile saline solution was mixed with the vaccine.

Among the people reconstituting the vaccine were Julie Brazee of Central City and Kamrie Peterson of Polk. Both work for Central District Health.

After their vaccinations, recipients were told to wait in the parking lot for 15 minutes to make sure they didn't react badly.

This week, CDHD exhausted its list of people 80 and older. So appointments were made Thursday for some people in their late 70s.

After the Pfizer vaccine is removed from subzero temperatures, it must be used within five days. So health officials were anxious to use as much of the vaccine as they could.

The flow of Pfizer and Moderna vaccines to Grand Island is starting to increase, "which is really awesome," Anderson said.

Plans call for people 70 and older to get their first shots next week, also at Fonner Park. The week after that, vaccinations may be ready for people 65 and older and those with underlying health conditions.

Two or three vaccination clinics may be held next week at Fonner Park.

To register for a vaccination, visit vaccinate.ne.gov. For assistance, call 833-998-2275.

TOP

News Channel Nebraska

Public Health Solutions getting 700 vaccine doses per week, eager for more (video)

By Michael Shively

CRETE, NE - One shot in the arm, equals one win in the fight against COVID-19 in Nebraska.

The problem right now, is the victories aren't coming very quickly.

"This isn't a distribution problem, it's a supply problem. I know that people are getting upset and frustrated because they can't get in to their provider right away," Public Health Solutions Health Director Kim Showalter said. "If we had all the vaccine we needed, those providers would roll people through much more quickly."

Public Health Solutions covers about 53,000 people across Fillmore, Gage, Jefferson, Saline and Thayer counties. The health department gets about 700 doses of the Moderna vaccine from the state each week. Health Director Kim Showalter says she can't do anything to increase that number.

"Well, we try but no. The state can't produce more vaccine than they get," Showalter said. "They get a very specific amount and then they send that out by population."

Showalter expects the allotment to stay the same for at least a few weeks. If it holds at this amount, she says it would take four to five months to work through Phase 1B, which includes people 65 and

over, educators and food workers.

Still, she says the arrival of vaccines has energized her staff.

“We feel like the vaccine is kind of the beginning of the end," Showalter said. "If people will take the vaccine, if people will trust that the vaccine is going to work and enough people will take this vaccine, we could end this thing.”

Public Health Solutions is using local healthcare providers to administer the vaccine. The health department splits their vaccine doses between eight providers based on the proportion of the 65 and older population the provider serves. Because of this strategy, you won’t see any public vaccine clinics - at least not yet.

“If we tried to stage those clinics, we would have to pull that vaccine away from the providers to have enough to do the large community clinics," Showalter said. "As soon as we have access to more vaccine, we will definitely start doing those larger community events."

In the meantime, Showalter is urging patience.

“No vaccine is sitting on a shelf here, no one is sitting on vaccine," Showalter said. "Our staff is managing a huge logistical maneuver to get this out to the five counties.”

TOP

WOWT

55 and older senior home explains how they get vaccine doses (video)

By Brian Mastre

OMAHA, Neb. (WOWT) - Nebraska is set to get 21 percent more doses of vaccine.

No doubt that’s good news to local health departments who have been clamoring for more as the new phase of shots this week go to those 80-and-older.

Questions have been raised regarding why one facility in the metro was able to vaccinate some younger than that.

This weekend the residents of a west Omaha senior living facility for active adults 55-and-older will receive their second dose of the COVID vaccine.

It has some wondering how did they get the vaccine since Douglas County is only in the 80-and-older phase?

Avidor Omaha at 132nd and Pacific opened at the height of the pandemic -- around Thanksgiving.

Months ago, its parent company, with 18-facilities across the country and most of them in Florida applied for and received permission to be a part of the national pharmacy program.

Meaning its vaccinations are separate from the state's allotment of doses.

Chris Shupe said, "Even though we say we're 55-plus, we don't have anyone under the age of 70. If it wasn't available here for the residents, they would still qualify to go to a clinic and receive the vaccine."

On Sunday 23-residents will receive their 2nd dose of the Pfizer vaccine in addition to a handful of staff members.

The age range is from 72-to-94.

CVS Pharmacy comes here to give the shots.

"They consider to be in the age group. They're just lucky to have it delivered here and they don't have to get in a car and go somewhere. They don't think it's jumping the line. They consider themselves in the same age group and they are," said Shupe.

Meanwhile, another clinic this week set up by the Douglas County Health Department and run by Nebraska Medicine targeted the 80-and-older population today -- including Robert and Judy McMaster.

"I like to be protected from the virus. That's what it's all about," said Robert.

"I have a new grand-baby that I haven't held. I'm anxious to hold her -- and see her get old," said Judy.

With more doses coming into the state many are hoping it will speed up what's been a slow vaccination process for our vulnerable seniors.

TOP

KETV

'Much to our surprise,' Omaha Police, Douglas County law enforcement get COVID-19 vaccine (video)

By Michelle Bandur

OMAHA, Neb. —
The Douglas County Health Department received an extra 1,950 doses this week.

Since law enforcement has been urging the governor to move them up in the process, they started to get vaccinated Thursday.

"Much to our surprise, this large opportunity happened a day ago," Omaha Police Deputy Chief Scott Gray said.

Gray and other police officers acted fast when they learned the health department had enough doses for all law enforcement personnel in Douglas County.

"It's important to get control of this so our officers are healthy and ready to respond to the citizens," he said.

"We've been looking to serve law enforcement for a while," Douglas County Health Department spokesman Phil Rooney said. "They certainly let it be known they have very good reasons to be protected and they do."

Local law enforcement leaders sent a letter to Gov. Pete Ricketts last month, urging him to move their group up in the distribution plan.

The state had officers potentially receiving the vaccine in May.

But the leaders worried COVID-19 outbreaks could be catastrophic if unvaccinated officers and deputies provided security at mass vaccination clinics.

"Just making sure we stayed at that higher level and not get bypassed for other groups," Gray said.

Rooney said Ricketts allowed 10 percent of the vaccine to be diverted to essential workers in the first tier of Phase 1B and when some pharmacies in the federal program didn't use all their supply for long term care facilities, it allowed for the extra doses.

"It's random and just kind of drops out of the sky. Unfortunately, it hasn't become a habit yet but we hope it becomes more regular."

"We certainly don't want to get back to those larger numbers especially with talk of new strains that are more contagious. We definitely want to get ahead of it while we can," Gray said.

Omaha Police Chief Todd Schmaderer also received his shot Thursday. But he said this clinic is about his officers who already have a dangerous job on the streets.

"They can put this other dangerous aspect behind them," he said.

Rooney said by the end of the three closed clinics, they'll have most of Douglas County law enforcement vaccinated.

TOP

Omaha World Herald

Omaha Police Department employees getting their first COVID vaccine shots

By Alia Conley

All Omaha Police Department employees are slated to get their first COVID-19 vaccine shots by Monday.

Thursday was the first day that members of the state's largest law enforcement agency could receive their initial shot of the Pfizer vaccine.

Clinics will continue Friday and Monday to ensure that anyone in the 1,084-employee department who wants the shot can get the shot. That total includes 865 full-time sworn officers and 42 part-time sworn officers plus 147 full-time civilian employees and 30 part-time civilian employees.

Chief Todd Schmaderer, among other officers, got his first dose Thursday.

Lt. Sherie Thomas, a police department spokesperson, said it was important for department employees to be vaccinated because of their health and "to keep them safe as they work to keep our community safe."

"Law enforcement officers have an inherently dangerous job as it is, and the coronavirus adds to that," she said in a statement. "We are glad that OPD employees are able to get the vaccine."

Thomas said that since the beginning of the pandemic, 236 employees, which includes sworn officers and civilian workers, have tested positive for COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

Omaha firefighters, who all are trained EMTs or paramedics, were able to get their first shots in late December.

Assistant Fire Chief Kathy Bossman said the department is in the midst of the six clinics scheduled to dole out the second dose, with two clinics left.

When those are finished, roughly two-thirds of the fire department will be fully vaccinated, she said. For workers who were out of town, had to isolate or initially didn't choose to get the vaccine, the Douglas County Health Department has been flexible in allowing those people to get inoculated at other clinics, Bossman said.

TOP

Omaha World Herald

Vaccination opponents argue for right to refuse shots at Nebraska Legislature hearing

By Martha Stoddard

LINCOLN — Nebraskans opposed to vaccinations filled all available hearing room seats and crowded the Capitol hallway Thursday to fight for freedom from mandatory immunizations.

Parents, nurses, chiropractors, business owners and others came out in favor of one bill guaranteeing people the right to decline mandatory vaccination during a public health emergency and against another bill that would narrow parents' ability to exempt their child from vaccinations.

Legislative Bill 643, introduced by State Sen. Ben Hansen of Blair, would declare that citizens have the right to decline a mandatory vaccine directive from the state government. It would also give parents the right to decline vaccination for their dependents and employers the right to decline for their employees.

Hansen said he doesn't expect government officials to issue a vaccination mandate in Nebraska. But Hansen said many other unexpected things happened during the past year as the state grappled with the pandemic, including orders to close businesses and restrict religious services.

"This legislation is in no way against vaccines or the COVID vaccine," he said. "This is more saying the state does not have the right to inject anything into our bodies mandatorily."

Gov. Pete Ricketts has said that he would not make coronavirus vaccinations mandatory, just as he has declined to issue a mask mandate.

LB 447, as introduced by Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh of Omaha, would have removed parents' ability to opt out of having their child immunized before attending a licensed child care center. Current law allows children to skip state-mandated immunizations for medical reasons or if a parent does not want the child immunized.

At a hearing before the Health and Human Services Committee, Cavanaugh offered an amendment that would allow parents to exempt their children based on religious beliefs, similar to the exemption for children entering K-12 schools. She said parents need to consider the needs of others when deciding about immunizing their child.

"It does protect other children and child care workers and society as a whole," she said.

Dr. Michelle Walsh, a Lincoln pediatrician and president of the Nebraska Medical Association, testified in favor of Cavanaugh's bill and against Hansen's bill. She spoke from personal experience about the polio that left her father in a wheelchair and contributed to his death at age 48.

"We don't see polio now because of vaccines," she said.

Nationally, Walsh said, there has been an increase in parents opting out of getting their children vaccinated, which has lead to outbreaks of potentially deadly but preventable diseases such as measles, mumps and whooping cough. But in Nebraska, more than 97% of children are vaccinated.

But most speakers took opposite positions.

Among them was Allie French, the founder of Nebraskans Against Government Overreach, who argued that people's bodies should be sovereign. She disputed the idea that any disease outbreak could be traced to unvaccinated children and said that if parents are concerned, they can keep their children away from their unvaccinated peers.

Robert Borer said the issue was about "personal responsibility and freedom." He said that drugs and vaccines don't prevent disease and can often be harmful and deadly and that people have the right to protect their own health.

Others told of their children or themselves suffering severe reactions to vaccinations. Dan Shiermann, a nurse, said his 2-year-old son developed full-body eczema from a routine vaccination. Colleen Fogarty, a retired nurse, said she suffered encephalopathy after receiving a smallpox vaccination while she was working.

"I beg you to give me my right to refuse," she said.

Fogarty and others raised particular concerns about the safety of the coronavirus vaccines, citing a variety of claims about their effects.

TOP

Lincoln Journal Star

Vaccine opponents back bill allowing them to opt out of state directives

By Chris Dunker

Sen. Ben Hansen of Blair said the state and federal response to the coronavirus pandemic illustrated how quickly the government can upend the lives of citizens.

The state lawmaker told the Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee on Thursday he believed future protections need to be put in place should the government enact a mandatory vaccine directive to battle future public health emergencies.

Hansen's bill (LB643) was "in no way against vaccines or the COVID-19 vaccines," he told the committee, but was written to given individuals, parents and businesses the choice to decline a vaccine without penalty during a state of emergency or any time after.

"This is more saying the state does not have a right to inject anything into our bodies," Hansen said. "One of the things we're trying to accomplish is (to) give the people of Nebraska a kind of platform to stand on if that ever happens."

That prompted questions from Sen. Matt Williams of Gothenburg, who asked Hansen if his bill could be interpreted to allow Nebraskans to decline vaccinations "any time after for any reason whatsoever."

“It could possibly be interpreted that way,” Hansen replied.

“Would that be your intent to have it interpreted that way?” Williams asked.

Hansen said that was “not necessarily” the intent of the bill, adding he believed the language of the bill could be asserted if the state was attempting to continue to mandate a vaccine even after the public health crisis was over.

Dozens of people testified in support of the bill in person Thursday, nearly all of them waiting together in close proximity in a line outside the committee room. Masks are not required at the Capitol; only a few who stood in line to speak in support wore one.

Supporting testimony ranged from personal stories about immunizations and the choice made by parents to not vaccinate their children, explanations of faith-based opposition to vaccines, assertions of individual sovereignty and constitutional rights, as well as a range of conspiracy theories and debunked claims.

“It is unconstitutional and against the inalienable rights of the citizens of this country to be forced, coerced or tricked into vaccination,” Allie French said.

French added the government “has no right” to force an individual to get a shot if it was against their religion or philosophical beliefs.

Several registered nurses and other health care workers also spoke in support of Hansen’s bill, saying they believed a mandatory vaccination program would remove a patient’s ability to give consent to a medical procedure.

“I beg you to give me my right to refuse,” said Colleen Fogarty, a retired pediatric nurse.

Living with an autoimmune disorder, Tyler Hackbart, a chiropractor from Seward, said he has never received a vaccine. He asked the senators to "use the best evidence you have and then make a faith decision" in advancing the bill from committee.

"I'm for the freedom to choose for myself and my family, and I hope you guys are, too," Hackbart said.

Others said they believed vaccines were the underlying cause of autism — a widely spread claim debunked by researchers — as well as other diseases, or offered discredited conspiracy theories about vaccines being used to assert control over the population.

Only one person testified in opposition Thursday.

Dr. Michelle Walsh, a Lincoln pediatrician and the president of the Nebraska Medical Association, said declining immunization rates in Nebraska and elsewhere have resulted in increased instances of

measles, mumps and whooping cough.

She also reiterated Williams' concern from the beginning of the hearing, saying the NMA also interpreted the bill's language to apply "in perpetuity," and said it wasn't clear how Hansen's bill would reconcile with school immunization requirements currently in state law.

To attend public or private school in Nebraska, children must be immunized against polio, chicken pox, measles, mumps and rubella, among other diseases largely stamped out due to vaccines.

"We have serious concerns that LB643 would be contradictory to these existing policies and allow parents to opt out with no sincere reasons," Walsh said. "This would, in effect, raise the rates of future types of preventable disease outbreaks which have been under control for decades."

The committee took no action on the bill Thursday.

At the end of the hearing, Hansen said LB643 "struck a chord" with many, adding the Legislature is considering several bills where the pandemic exposed a need for action, including expanding SNAP benefits, implementing protections for tenants, and providing aid to businesses.

"Where are we going to be at during the next emergency?" he asked. "That's why it's important to look at this now."

TOP

Omaha World Herald

Nebraska bill to triple fines against officials who enact, then violate, health measures draws no support

By Paul Hammel

LINCOLN — No one testified Thursday in support of a legislative bill that would triple fines against public officials who enact mask mandates and other public health measures and then violate them.

The state senator who introduced the proposal, Sen. Ben Hansen of Blair, didn't cite any examples of that happening in Nebraska, instead calling his Legislative Bill 645 a "proactive" measure against what he called "egregious oversteps" by local officials during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jack Cheloha, who lobbies for the City of Omaha, testified against the measure, saying it was probably an unconstitutional violation of the equal protection clause by enacting a higher penalty for one class or people. He also said the bill would punish a city clerk, even though they didn't vote and just documented the enactment of a health measure.

"The pandemic we're facing now is unprecedented," Cheloha told the Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee. "The city council has the authority to protect the safety, health and welfare of its people. They're all public citizens. They have the obligation to follow (directed health

measures) like everyone else."

LB 645 calls for tripling the normal fine if a public official violates a directed health measure that they signed, authorized or enacted. If a criminal offense was committed, the bills calls for enhancing the offense by the next higher penalty levels. The bill would apply to city, council or local health officials, as well as the governor, a mayor or city manager.

While Hansen didn't cite any examples Thursday of missteps by Nebraska officials, the issue of public officials violating restrictions they signed has come up nationally. A recall effort against California Gov. Gavin Newson gained steam in November after he was seen dining at a pricey Napa Valley restaurant, without masks or socially distanced, in violation of restrictions he helped set.

Hansen said that directed health measures have hurt businesses and caused political turmoil.

"When the people who enact these orders don't abide by them, that is something I cannot tolerate," the senator said.

TOP

Lincoln Journal Star

Lancaster County reports 3 more COVID-19 deaths

By Riley Johnson

Three more Lancaster County residents have died of coronavirus and an additional 51 county residents have contracted COVID-19, the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department reported Thursday.

The Health Department in a news release identified the deceased as two women in their 70s who were both hospitalized, and a man in his 60s who was at home.

Their deaths raised the local pandemic death toll to 205, and thus far in the pandemic, 27,009 Lancaster County residents have contracted COVID-19, according to the Health Department.

COVID-19 hospitalizations remain comparatively low with 49 patients with the virus in the care of Lincoln hospitals on Thursday.

The 49 patients included 36 from Lancaster County and two who were on ventilators, the news release said.

Daily hospitalizations have fallen from nearly 100 in late December and early January, according to the Health Department.

Statewide, hospitalizations dropped to 278, the lowest figure since October.

TOP

Hastings Tribune

South Heartland's COVID-19 risk reading dips again as vaccinations continue

By Andy Raun

The South Heartland Health District's COVID-19 risk dial reading for this week dropped again within the "elevated" zone as vaccinations of senior citizens continued.

The risk dial reading, which is updated once per week on Wednesdays, dropped to 2.2 from 2.4 for the previous week, the district health department said in a news release.

The new reading is toward the low end of the elevated zone, which is color-coded orange and includes readings of 2-3 on the dial.

The dial, which assesses danger associated with further local spread of the novel coronavirus disease, COVID-19, is based on various metrics related to movement of the virus in local communities and related testing, tracing and treatment capacities.

The dial has four zones: Low risk (zero to 1), moderate (1-2), elevated (2-3) and severe (3-4). The South Heartland reading has bounced around within the orange zone for several recent weeks but now has dropped for a second consecutive week.

In Wednesday's news release, Michele Bever, the district health department executive director, credited the current downward trend in daily tallies of new confirmed cases as a key factor in the risk reading's decline.

"The main driver for this drop is the 14-day average of new daily cases, which decreased to 32 per 100,000 for the week ending Jan. 30," Bever said.

As of Wednesday evening, the 14-day average had dropped to 30 new daily cases per 100,000, according to South Heartland's COVID-19 dashboard posted online at www.southheartland.com.

That figure is extrapolated since the total population of the health district — Adams, Webster, Clay and Nuckolls counties — is only around 45,000.

"Our high was a 14-day average of 118 cases per 100,000 on Nov. 20, and our goal is eight or fewer new daily cases per 100,000," Bever said. "We are headed in the right direction."

Bever said hospital capacity indicators were similar to Wednesday of last week.

According to South Heartland's hospital capacity dashboard on Wednesday, 45% of intensive care beds in district hospitals were available for new patients. Nineteen percent of in-patients — seven in all — were COVID-19-positive, with one needing a ventilator.

The health district has three hospitals: Mary Lanning Healthcare in Hastings, Brodstone Memorial Hospital in Superior, and Webster County Community Hospital in Red Cloud.

In another news release Thursday night, Bever announced a total of 30 new COVID-19 cases being confirmed for Tuesday through Thursday — 15 in Adams County, six in Clay, eight in Nuckolls and one in Webster.

Meanwhile, injections continue in the health district under terms of the state of Nebraska's vaccination plan. South Heartland is in its second week of vaccinations under Phase 1B of the plan, which covers the general population of senior citizens age 65 and up, plus other adults with underlying high-risk health conditions and designated categories of essential workers.

On Monday, Bever announced the health department had been told it would receive 800 first doses of the Moderna vaccine product this week — up by 200 doses from last week — and that about 340 second doses of Moderna vaccine would be administered in the district this week, as well.

The expected vaccine arrived Tuesday afternoon. By Thursday night, Bever said, 60% of it had gone into district residents' arms.

Currently, two vaccine products have been approved for emergency use nationwide: the one produced by Pfizer and BioNTech and the one by Moderna. Supplies are limited, so a plan for orderly distribution is necessary.

South Heartland's main focus at the moment is on vaccinating the senior citizens, with a reverse-age approach starting with the oldest.

"Ninety percent of this week's vaccine allotment will be directed toward our elderly who are at highest risk," Bever said. "We will again use a small percent of this week's doses for essential workers such as law enforcement, fire department personnel, and utilities, as well as some health workers from Phase 1A."

(Phase 1A, which began when the first Pfizer vaccines arrived in mid-December 2020, was for frontline health care workers and emergency medical services personnel, as well as for long-term care residents and employees. Vaccinations for the the long-term care group were coordinated by major pharmacies through a separate government program.)

South Heartland, which is headquartered in Hastings, is working with health care partners throughout the district to get the vaccines administered.

"Residents can register to get the vaccine on our website where we have a link to Nebraska's vaccine registration system," Bever said. "You will be notified when it is your turn to schedule an appointment. Watch the local news media, the health department website and the SHDHD Facebook page for updated information about the status and timeline of the vaccine distribution process."

With the health department still relying on weekly allotments of vaccine and the large population of senior citizens in the South Heartland district, Phase 1B is expected to be a lengthy one.

“We are asking for patience with the vaccine,” Bever said. “Due to limited amounts of vaccine coming to us each week, it will take many months for everyone who wants the vaccine to get it. If you are in the current priority group of age 65+, it may still be many weeks before it is your turn.”

Although Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts recently relaxed directed health measures across the state due to current improvements in COVID-19 metrics, precautions remain critically important to preventing a resurgence in infections.

“All of these steps we are taking, all the tools we are using to block the spread of the coronavirus, are working to protect the health care system and to protect our most vulnerable,” Bever said. “We need to continue doing what’s working. We need to avoid the three Cs: avoid crowded places, avoid close contact, avoid confined spaces. We need to continue to wear masks that cover our noses and mouths, we need to stay home when we are sick, we need to disinfect frequently-touched surfaces and objects, we need to wash our hands, and we need to get the COVID vaccine when it is our turn.”

As of Thursday night, a total of more than 3,100 first doses of vaccine and more than 1,000 second doses had been administered in the district since mid-December. Those numbers don’t include the vaccinations delivered at long-term care facilities, which likely number in the hundreds.

TOP

Nebraska City News Press

Weekly COVID-19 update released by Nebraska DHHS on Feb. 3

The latest statewide total of COVID-19 cases is 192,042 as of Feb. 2. There have been 26 COVID-19-related deaths in Nebraska reported in the last seven days, for a total of 1,931. To date, a total of 137,684 Nebraskans testing positive for COVID-19 have recovered.

COVID-19 hospitalizations have continued to decline in the last week, with Nebraska hospitals caring for an average of 322 COVID-19 patients a day over the last seven days. Averages in prior weeks were 402, 444 and 481 COVID-19 patients.

The daily average of new positive cases in the last week was 455, compared to 562 daily cases last week, and 745 and 896 cases a day in recent weeks. Averages for positive cases are now based on test dates, instead of lab reporting date, which provides a more precise view of COVID-19 cases. Data from previous days is updated as lab results are received.

Dr. Gary Anthone, Chief Medical Officer and Director of Public Health for DHHS, said, “We're still in the early days of this vaccination effort and so it's critical we continue to limit virus spread. Wearing a mask, washing hands, and staying home when you're sick are our best defense against COVID-19."

Anyone who has not completed vaccination and may have been exposed to COVID-19 should quarantine and get tested.

Nebraskans can be #BigRedResponsible by wearing a mask. Additionally, watching your distance, washing hands often, staying home when you're sick, and avoiding the 3C's – crowded places, close contact with others, and confined spaces – are still critical to limiting infection.

Vaccine Update

This week, Nebraska is receiving 30,125 first doses, including 14,625 Pfizer and 15,500 Moderna doses. Second dose shipments scheduled for this week total 25,825, including 14,625 Pfizer and 11,200 Moderna doses.

In addition, 5,800 Pfizer doses initially allocated to the Federal Pharmacy Program in Nebraska will be released this week, with 11,700 Pfizer doses released in the next two weeks. These doses will be used to support vaccination for Phase 1B groups.

DHHS is allocating doses via a vaccine network that includes local health departments, federally qualified health centers, community-based clinics, and tribal health care centers across the state. A total of 125 sites across Nebraska receive vaccine shipments.

Nebraska's 19 local health departments are coordinating vaccination for Phase 1 priority groups.

First dose vaccinations for Phase 1A groups are being finalized, and second dose clinics are being scheduled appropriately to complete vaccination in the coming weeks. Phase 1A includes health care workers and residents and staff of long-term care facilities.

All Nebraska counties expect to be vaccinating Phase 1B priority groups this week. Phase 1B includes those 65 and older, those 18 and older who are at high-risk for severe COVID-19, and those in critical industries, including: first responders, educators and daycare providers, those in the utilities and transportation sectors, corrections staff, and those working in food processing and at grocery stores.

Those who've received a first dose are reminded that a second dose is needed to complete vaccination, which research shows provides the best protection against COVID-19 symptoms and potential complications.

Community clinics with scheduled appointments are the primary way vaccine doses are being given to help ensure all doses can be used in the required timeframe. Community clinics will stagger appointments in order to observe social distancing and provide space for monitoring after vaccination.

COVID-19 vaccines are not yet available to the public and it's expected to be late spring before mass vaccination begins.

The Pfizer vaccine was 95 percent effective and the Moderna vaccine 94 percent effective in phase three clinical trials. Comparatively, the flu vaccine is generally 40 to 60 percent effective. You cannot get COVID-19 from the vaccine. Two doses are needed to reach full effectiveness against COVID-19, and the same brand of vaccine must be administered for both doses. Thus far, the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine has been approved for those 16 and older, and the Moderna vaccine approved for those 18 and older.

The state is taking recommendations of the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) into consideration. Priority groups and timing projections remain tentative and will be adjusted as federal recommendations are issued and as vaccine shipments are scheduled.

Allocation Scorecard

New this week, a Vaccine Allocation Scorecard is now available on the DHHS COVID-19 Vaccine Information page to help track administration of doses allocated by DHHS to Nebraska's local health districts and the CDC's Federal Pharmacy Program.

The Federal Pharmacy Program contracted pharmacy staff to help administer COVID-19 vaccine to residents and staff at long-term care facilities. Doses for long-term care facilities came out of the state's total vaccine allocation, which totaled 46,800 first doses and 46,800 second doses.

The scorecard provides the number and percentage of first and second doses administered by all local health districts and the Federal Pharmacy Program. Allocations are updated weekly and doses administered is updated daily.

Vaccine Registration

DHHS has a website available to help Nebraskans register to be notified when COVID-19 vaccination begins in their area.

Available at vaccinate.ne.gov , more than 140,600 registrations have been received so far.

Those 65 and older who have registered for vaccination with their local health department do not need to register a second time using the state site. Local health departments and DHHS are working to migrate all registrations.

Those who are 18 to 64 with a high-risk medical condition and live outside of Lancaster County are asked to register using the state site to help ensure proper prioritization in Phase 1B. Residents of Lancaster County should register using the local health department's online vaccine registration option.

Those interested in registering will need to provide name and contact information, date of birth, occupation, and answer health questions used to help determine priority group eligibility. Any information entered is strictly confidential and used solely for this purpose. Friends, family and

caregivers are encouraged to assist others with vaccine sign-up if needed, and the DHHS Information line can assist those with limited technology, language or Internet access, and is available by calling (531) 249-1873 or (833) 998-2275.

A Spanish version of the website is in development.

Vaccine Dashboard

As of Tuesday, more than 198,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine have been given to those in Phase 1 priority groups. More than 55,000 or 3.71% of Nebraskans 16 or older have completed vaccination.

To follow Nebraska's COVID-19 vaccination progress, please visit the COVID-19 Vaccination dashboard .

The vaccination dashboard is updated each morning with data from the prior day.

Monitoring for New COVID-19 Strains

Nebraska is monitoring for new and emerging COVID-19 strains, which appear to be more contagious, but do not appear to result in more severe COVID-19 cases. None of the three variants have been identified in Nebraska so far.

Genomic sequencing of positive samples is used to identify and confirm new strains, such as those first identified in Brazil, South Africa and the U.K. The state began sending positive COVID-19 samples to the CDC in December as part of its surveillance for emerging strains. In early January, Nebraska purchased equipment for the Nebraska Public Health Laboratory to begin in-state monitoring for emerging strains, and recently expanded in-house genomic sequencing capacity.

COVID-19 Testing

Testing continues to be crucial to limiting the spread of COVID-19. Anyone who may have been exposed to COVID-19, anyone experiencing any symptoms, those planning to travel, or those who are returning from travel are encouraged to schedule a COVID-19 test.

Free testing is available at more than 60 Test Nebraska sites across the state.

COVID-19 symptoms can include a fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, tiredness, muscle aches, headache, loss of taste or smell, sore throat, runny nose, nausea or vomiting, and diarrhea.

Visit Testnebraska.com , or TestNebraska.com/es for Spanish, to schedule an appointment. Those with questions about testing, or who need help completing the online assessment, can call the Test Nebraska hotline at (402) 207-9377.

Directed Health Measures

A five-phase series of Directed Health Measures (DHMs) aimed at preserving hospital capacity for urgent medical care is in effect for the entire state. Currently less than 10% of hospital beds are needed for COVID-19 patients.

As of Saturday, Jan. 30, the state is in the green phase, which removes capacity restrictions for indoor gatherings but it's recommended that Nebraskans continue following guidance to reduce virus transmission. Organizers of events for 500 or more people, or 1,000 people in Douglas County, are required to receive approval from their local health department. Capacity restrictions remain in place for Lancaster County.

Additionally, quarantine-related DHMs have been updated. Those who have received both COVID-19 vaccine doses, and those who have recovered from coronavirus in the past three months are not required to quarantine if they are exposed to someone with COVID-19.

Individuals in either situation are able to self-monitor for symptoms for 14 days, but are required to wear a mask when in public. Anyone who has symptoms must stay home.

DHHS immunization leaders will hold a Facebook Live session tomorrow, Thursday, Feb. 4 at 12:05 p.m. CT to discuss vaccination among minority populations and answer questions. For those unable to join, the discussion will be archived and available on the video tab of the DHHS Facebook page .

DHHS continues to share new information via its Coronavirus website, as well as on Facebook and Twitter . In addition, the DHHS COVID-19 information line is available to answer questions at (531) 249-1873 or (833) 998-2275. The line is staffed seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. CT.

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