**DHEC Vaccine Update Transcript**

**Jan. 25,2021**

**Cristi Moore:** Good afternoon, and welcome to DHEC’s January 25 media briefing on Covid-19 vaccination in South Carolina. I’m Cristi Moore, DHEC chief communication officer, and I'll be facilitating today's briefing with Dr. Brannon Traxler, who is DHEC's interim public health director. These briefings are held to share the latest updates and answer common questions about Covid-19 vaccines. DHEC appreciates the South Carolina press and its commitment to help us relay important information to South Carolinians. Dr. Traxler will provide an update and then we'll move into the facilitated Q and A portion, followed by a live Q and A if there's time. I’d like it to remind everyone to please remain on mute so that everyone can get a good quality recording, and at this time I’m going to turn it over to Dr. Brannon Traxler for today's update.

**Dr. Traxler:** Thanks, Cristi and good afternoon everyone. As Cristi said, we really do consider you guys very valuable partners, so thank you.

A lot of the headlines in South Carolina and across the country have been about vaccines for the past several weeks, I want to take some time to refocus our attention on the pandemic itself and the disease that continues to spread through all of our communities.

Here in South Carolina people are losing their lives every day to Covid-19 and it's essential that we don't lose sight of that. More than 6,000 South Carolinians have lost their lives to Covid-19 in the past year, thus 6,000 people who were alive a year ago today. Six thousand people who had loved ones, family and friends who miss them dearly. I, like all of you, am so happy and relieved and hopeful that the vaccines are here and that more than 277,000 doses have been administered in our state, and more than 313,000 appointments are scheduled for people to receive their vaccines. The shots will be our saving grace and will be a huge part of how we beat this pandemic, but the vaccines aren't an immediate end game. It isn't an automatic win and it isn't a get out of jail free card, the vaccines are saving lives but it will take months before enough of the population has been vaccinated to get herd immunity established. Herd immunity, when at least 70 percent of the population is vaccinated against a specific disease, making that disease much less significant of a threat to the overall public health.

Over and after the holidays South Carolina, like many other states in our country, saw a significant increase in cases, and our hospitals and our amazing and dedicated medical workers were extremely burdened in their ability to care for all of these hospitalized patients, many of whom were very sick and in the ICU and on ventilators. But because DHEC and our hospitals had prepared for this holiday surge, we were able to overcome and get through it and ensure South Carolinians received the medical care and treatment that they needed. Now that we're several weeks past the holiday season I am happy to say that our deaths cases and hospitalizations are no longer increasing, although I’m not confident in saying that they're decreasing either. We're seeing a small plateau for the last week or two.

This right now right, this moment, could be a turning point for our state, if we can muster up the dedication to continue to do what's right for a few more months. Give these vaccines and others time to really get out there. We can beat Covid-19 as quickly as vaccine production allows us to, if we continue to wear our masks, physically distance, get tested regularly and limit contact with those outside of our home. We can put South Carolina on a true downward trend and put us in the best position possible for stopping Covid-19.

As more and more of us have the opportunity to receive our shots, we continue to do our part to limit disease spread. Now we can save lives as we await more vaccine doses into South Carolina. We know that wearing masks and physical distancing works, it's not really debatable at all anymore. We have to follow the science, and the science tells us that we can dramatically reduce the risk of spreading Covid-19 if we take those simple actions that work.

We continue to be proud at DHEC of all South Carolinians and everything that they have sacrificed for the past year as we have all fought and continue to fight this pandemic together, and I know they won't stop now. So please wear a mask, stay six feet apart from others, stay home if you're ill with any symptoms, wash your hands often and continue to get tested. Thank you. Cristi back to you for questions.

**Cristi Moore: Dr. Traxler the first question we have is some facilities and hospitals are advertising that their vaccine clinics and drive-through events are for folks who are 65 and up. Seeing as how this is not in accordance with South Carolina's phase 1A, how is this allowed?**

**Dr. Traxler:** DHEC has provided guidance to all of the vaccine providers in the state regarding the populations who are eligible for vaccination, and we continue to stress to providers that it is important to follow that guidance which at this time is consists of the long-term care facility residents and staff, health care workers and those who are hospitalized over the age of 65 without Covid-19 and those who are age 70 and older in our state.

**Cristi Moore: This next set of questions is about Walmart. They recently announced that Covid-19 vaccination appointments at South Carolina Walmart locations are booked for this coming week, do you have any details you can provide regarding the Covid-19 vaccinations that will be given at Walmart and the first question also- is the Walmart supply coming from the state allotment of vaccinations, and are you all partnering with them to administer vaccines in South Carolina?**

**Dr. Traxler:** It is coming from the state allotment of vaccines, but we have allocated part of that allotment to a federal retail pharmacy partnership and Walmart along with several other pharmacies are receiving their Moderna vaccines directly from that partnership.

**Cristi Moore: Okay and the second question related to this is: have Covid-19 vaccine administrations begun yet at Walmart's in our state?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Yes, my understanding is that there are 15 as of today that are activated and providing the shots.

**Cristi Moore: And just like to know how exactly this works- do you know how people get appointments at South Carolina Walmart locations for this upcoming week via DHEC?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Sure, so those appointments are made directly through the retail pharmacy partner at Walmart or other pharmacies that are in that retail pharmacy partnership with the federal government.

**Cristi Moore: We've seen reports from other states about people who smoke cigarettes being prioritized for Covid-19 vaccinations, could you clarify if this is the case in South Carolina and if so does this apply to current smokers, people who smoked previously but still experience health impacts as a result, or both. And then lastly is smoking considered an underlying health condition?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Current smoking is my understanding. Current is on the list of conditions, underlying health conditions, that the CDC has put out for which they have data that show that those individuals are at a higher risk of severe illness if they were to catch Covid-19. I will have to confirm with our vaccine advisory committee specifically regarding smokers and whether they would meet that criteria as one of those underlying health conditions, whether that is being adopted by the vaccine advisory committee or not.

**Cristi Moore: Can you talk some more about residency not being a requirement of the vaccine, since South Carolina has a lot of snow birds and so many tourist destinations? Could we be potentially urging South Carolina's allocated doses to be administered to non-South Carolinians?**

**Dr. Traxler:** So we, like all states that I’m aware of are vaccinating those who are who are in our state at the time and qualify, meeting the recommendations and the requirements for that phase. Many states have crossed state line vaccinations occurring. Nothing has prevented South Carolinians work or maybe temporarily living in another state from getting vaccinated in those states, and so likewise we are doing the same while the allocations are to each state. I do want to remind everyone that this virus this disease is not just in South Carolina, it's across the country, it's across the world even, and so certainly, especially our neighboring partners in this fight, the border states of South Carolina as well as really all the other states, we're all in this together we all need to get as many people vaccinated as fast as we can. So that means helping each other out and they're helping to vaccinate some of our folks and we'll help to vaccinate some of their folks.

**Cristi Moore: Can you speak to the impact the Moderna vaccine has had on distribution to rural areas?**

**Dr. Traxler:** The Moderna vaccine becoming available to be allocated in South Carolina outside of the long-term care facilities was a big step in terms of allowing for distribution into those rural areas. That's mostly due to the logistics of the Moderna vaccine, it does not require that ultra cold frozen temperature, so you don't have to have the really fancy freezers. Moderna can be stored at a standard freezer and even further than that it can be stable at refrigerator temperature for 30 days instead of five like the Pfizer, and then even a vial of it once thawed out to room temperature is good for 12 hours instead of six. So it logistically makes it much easier, it can be sent out into these more rural areas much more easily and that is our goal. We're trying to spread the Moderna vaccine coming into the state to as many areas and parts of the states to of the state to cover all of it that we can.

**Cristi Moore: Are you aware of the second dose of the vaccine causing stronger side effects than the first dose, and is this a normal expected response?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I have heard and I’m aware that the data showed from clinical trials that some of these minor side effects, low grade fever, fatigue, muscle aches for a day or two, maybe a little bit more so of a sore arm, were more commonly present after the second dose than after the first. But I do want to remind everyone that still it's not a guarantee. Not everybody who gets their second dose feels this way, and even for those who do it's a minor uncomfortable feeling of the symptoms for a very short period of time for getting protection from a disease that could be at worst case fatal. So I would not let that stop anybody from getting their second dose.

**Cristi Moore: Can you provide an update on DHEC's new immunizations only call center, and also the new vaccine appointment scheduler?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Our hope is to have both the vaccine only call center open and available this week as well as a new vaccine appointment scheduler online available this week. We really thank our folks at the Care Line and within EMD’s PIPS line who have done an amazing job in responding to so many thousands of calls, so much more than their normal call volume every day. But we really have to free them up so they can continue providing the information and scheduling the non-vaccine appointments like they do aside from just Covid-19 vaccines. And so we need to let them handle a lot of the rest of these functions and so that's the importance of opening the dedicated call center and we'll have the new number and the hours of operation and we do plan for it to be seven days a week, just like the Care Line now available

Later this week the vaccine scheduler is also expected to go live, our IT experts have been working with the vaccine providers and others to build out the system. It'll be much more user friendly than the VAMS that we have been using and it should assist in minimizing some of the current limitations that some of our elderly populations have with navigating email and the internet because it will be much more straightforward as I said than VAMS. We, like many states and like many of our vaccine providers, and like many of the public have been frustrated with the federal VAMS system and so this new scheduler is South Carolina's answer to work towards solving that issue. We should have more information as I said, later this week about both of those.

**Cristi Moore: The House Ways and Means Committee meets to address the vaccine relief bill today. If DHEC were to receive additional funds from the state for vaccine relief, how would that money be used?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We would use any additional funding that we got to increase vaccine access across the state for when more vaccine does become available. It is important to remember that the biggest challenge right now is just the limited number of doses of vaccine available, not just in South Carolina but everywhere in the country. These funds would cover the cost of DHEC staff to help vaccinate people in our health departments or even off-site at locations other than our health departments, other community clinics, and that will help ensure that there are clinics being held in their rural and underserved communities across the state.

**Cristi Moore: That kind of dovetails nicely into this next question- when will rural communities become a priority for the vaccine? Since hospitals are not close in many of these communities in South Carolina, how is DHEC going to ensure equitable and efficient access to people in rural communities?**

**Dr. Traxler:** This is a strategy that we have already begun implementing and we'll continue to be implementing more and more. We have already brought vaccine providers on that are not hospitals that are out in these rural communities. The Federally Qualified Health Centers began vaccinating last week I believe, and the rural health clinics receive vaccine this starting this week I believe. I may be off by a week on that, but anyway they both now are receiving vaccine and are out in the communities vaccinating. In addition, as more vaccine becomes available and we're able to broaden access, we will be working with other vaccine providers and the DHEC health departments to make sure that the clinics are being done in all of the rural areas, so that everyone regardless of how close they are to a hospital has access.

**Cristi Moore: Has South Carolina seen the Covid-19 variant B117? Is it in surrounding states including North Carolina, and lastly is South Carolina able to test for this variant in our state labs?**

**Dr. Traxler:** We have not, that we have detected, had a case of the variant in South Carolina. If we were to have a case, a reported case of one of these SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19 variants, we would publicly announce it via a news release and our public health lab has been sequencing doing genomic sequencing on specimens since June and has continued to do so. It has become even more diligent about carefully and actively looking for those instances of variants in our state.

**Cristi Moore: A study from the Kaiser Family Foundation shows half of black people are “not” or “not at all” confident that the vaccine distribution efforts account for the needs of black people. How is a state going to ensure equitable access to the vaccine for people of color and impoverished communities?**

**Dr. Traxler:** One of the ways we're going to do it is similar to what we're doing with the rural communities, and that's just getting the vaccine available and for people to access in any community. That means bringing on providers, setting up DHEC clinics, working with existing providers to do mobile clinics and working with some of the trusted leaders in the black community to demonstrate that the vaccines are safe and to help remind people of the importance of vaccination. But also, to draw attention to the vaccine clinics so people know when and where they are.

**Cristi Moore: Are more providers onboarding to get activated this week or next week, and if so, will these newly activated locations target more rural areas? If not will DHEC likely wait for more vaccine supply to activate more locations?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Right now we are not planning to activate any additional enrolled providers this week, because again the challenge isn't having enough providers, right now we have more than enough enrolled providers. The challenge right now is the lack of available vaccine. As more vaccine flows into our state then more providers will be activated to help administer doses. We are working with, as I said, the Federally Qualified Health Centers and those partners who are stepping up in our state, such as in the faith-based community, the business community to make sure that we're getting vaccine into places like these rural and underserved areas that don't have current access.

**Cristi Moore: What does the data show in terms of how long immunity lasts after receiving the vaccine?**

**Dr. Traxler:** That is still being studied, and so we don't have any additional information at this time to know how long it lasts. And of course, what happens with the mutations of the virus itself would also determine if we needed additional shots, such as an annual one like the flu shot. So it'll be a matter of not only how long the immunity lasts, but also whether the virus changes enough to need changes to the vaccine.

**Cristi Moore: If a person is diagnosed with Covid-19 after receiving the first shot, do they have to start the series over or just get the second shot after their acute stage of illness?**

**Dr. Traxler:** They do not have to start the series over again. They do need to be completely improved and their illness have resolved and certainly have been released from isolation from their acute illness of Covid-19 before they get their second shot. But again, they don't have to restart, they don't have to go back and take that first shot again.

**Cristi Moore: Okay and this is a sort of a long three-parter. How does DHEC decide on the allotment of vaccines to each provider across the state? If a provider can administer more vaccines per week than other providers, are they provided with a greater allotment of vaccines? And finally, will DHEC be allotting more vaccines to Prisma Health this week since they said they are working to administer 10,000 vaccines a day?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Until two weeks ago we were getting requests that were coming in from hospitals and other providers based on the amount of vaccine that we had coming into the state. We were able to nearly meet, nearly fulfill all of those requests, which do range in size based on the capacity and the number of staff and number of people in that community that are Phase 1A. With the requests from the hospitals and other providers beginning two weeks ago, we saw a significant increase in the amounts of vaccines that were being requested, whereas the number of doses coming into the state still was the same as we've been getting in previous weeks. For the last couple of weeks we've been able to only fulfill a portion of every facility's orders, but our DHEC board is going to be meeting tomorrow and we'll be presenting some models to them for how to allocate vaccine. They will be helping to work with us to determine the best allocation method going forward, and that would start with this week's allocation.

**Cristi Moore: How many vaccines did DHEC receive this week? Has DHEC been given a timeline from the CDC on what South Carolina's vaccine allotment, when it might be increasing, and if so how much will South Carolina be receiving in future weeks?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Certainly, and I'll have to get you the exact number because I don't have it pulled up right in front of me. But we got, as usual, between 60,000 and 64,000 first doses this week. We also received a similar number of second doses. Just to be clear, 60,000-64 000 first doses and 60,000-64,000 second doses. We have not been given a timeline from the CDC. At this point we've been told to expect to keep receiving what we've been receiving for the foreseeable future, so I don't have any predictions for when it does increase or by how much it would.

**Cristi Moore: Can you tell us more about the Johnson & Johnson trials, and when do you think an emergency use authorization will be issued?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Sure, so what I’m hearing about those is what I suspect you all are hearing, what is publicly known out there, and that is that they are looking very good and they're getting very close to being able to send their data to the independent data review board, being able to say “okay we've got what we need, apply for your emergency use authorization now.” So I don't have any insider knowledge on it, but what we have been hearing is that they could be applying in the next number of weeks for their EUA and then it would go through the process with the FDA’s committees and the FDA authorizing the EUA.

**Cristi Moore: Okay, and this is sort of a follow-up to that, how would having another vaccine like the Johnson & Johnson one help the state, and who do you all plan to use that vaccine for?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Whether it's the Johnson & Johnson one or any other brand vaccine that were to come, certainly the more vaccines that receive an emergency use authorization then that means the more vaccines will be flowing into South Carolina, and so we can allocate more out to all the vaccine providers and more people can get shots in their arms every week. Certainly, additional vaccines coming on board would be very beneficial. For the amount of vaccines we're getting, in regards to who we plan to use that vaccine for, we will be awaiting the guidance initially from the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, that CDC committee ACIP, that will make the decision in terms of the ages and which populations. If they, for example for Pfizer they said adults 16 and older, for Moderna they said 18 and older, so for Johnson & Johnson we would be waiting to see what their guidance is, and what the data shows. Whether they show if there's any specific subpopulations that it performed better or not as well for, and so we would take that all into consideration when determining exactly which populations in which to use the J & J vaccine.

**Cristi Moore: Okay and this is the last two-part question before I turn it over to live Q and A. When will we know more about who is in Phase 1B, and will consideration be given to those with mental or physical disabilities?**

**Dr. Traxler:** I anticipate that that we will be working with the Vaccine Advisory Committee here within the next week or two to finalize more, to provide more detail at least, about the Phase 1B populations. At this time, I can't speak to whether or not anyone with disabilities would be on the list or not. We'll be getting the recommendations from the vaccine advisory committee and then reviewing and discussing those

**Cristi Moore: Chris Joseph can you please ask your question?**

**Chris Joseph: Hey Dr. Traxler, this morning news broke that Moderna was testing a booster over concerns that its vaccine was less effective to the South Africa variant. From your perspective how concerned should South Carolinians be who have already gotten the Moderna vaccine that it could be proved ineffective, and should they be preparing to get a booster?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Right now, we have not seen any evidence of the South African variant in South Carolina or really this region of the world. I would say that I am very glad that Moderna is being proactive and is working on this, but at the time it is really important for everyone in South Carolina to focus on getting one of the two vaccines that's available right now, either the Pfizer or the Moderna. One advantage to these two vaccines is that the type of vaccine they are, the MRNA, can be fairly easily adjusted to account for different mutations and different variants. But right now the main thing, as far as we know the only thing, circulating around in South Carolina is your standard Covid-19 virus as far as CoV-2, and we know that both vaccines available in the state are very effective, 94 to 95 percent, against that strain of the virus.

**Cristi Moore:** Vanessa please ask your question.

**Vanessa:** **Thank you I just had a follow-up to your response about some of the second dose reactions. I know you mentioned previously in one of these three things that first dose, second dose kind of have a biological action within the body. Could that play a role in that?**

**Dr. Traxler:** Sorry, I think you're breaking up on me a little bit, but you're asking if I had any understanding for why maybe the you're more likely to have some of these side effects from the second dose than the first? So the first dose really is that primer for your immune system, and then that second dose is really is a booster shot and it's the one that really kicks that antibody production into gear much higher than it was even with that first dose. It is likely any of these mild side effects that people have temporarily, which again not everyone gets, are likely just a side effect of your immune reaction doing what it needs to do, your immune system doing what it needs to do in that reaction it's having in response to that vaccine, to prepare to build a lot of antibodies and a lot of protection for you. These are not vaccines that use any part of the actual virus like a live or a killed version of the virus, so you cannot get Covid-19 from either of these vaccines.

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

**Kailyn:** **Thank you so much Dr. Traxler. There's been a lot of confusion from folks who are trying to schedule that second dose appointment, I know you've touched on this quite a few times people are saying they're being asked to go online and try to schedule it through the VAMS system, but it's unclear if VAMS even knows that they're scheduling their first or their second and they don't know will the provider know if it's first or second, so that's my first question to you. How do they go through that process, if you have a general idea? And secondly, folks who attended that DHEC’s site at the fairgrounds January 15th they have been having some confusion on how to schedule the second appointment. What are you guys doing to help those folks out?**

**Dr. Traxler:** So as to your first question, what I understand from BAMS, and what I will tell you is from my experience in using it to schedule mine, it would not let me. Somehow it knows which dose you're scheduling, because it would not let me schedule before enough time had passed for me to be receiving my second dose. So, I don't know that it necessarily knows which appointment specifically is first or second dose, but it won't let you book it too early. If people are having difficulty with the VAMS and with scheduling their appointment on there, then we really encourage them to reach out to that vaccine provider where they got their first dose and ask for some assistance. And we're really encouraging those vaccine providers, first of all, to provide their second dose appointment when people are leaving their first dose. But also, if people have already received their first dose, to work with them to help get them in, just go to receive their second dose on time.

Then as to the fairgrounds, we will have to follow up with that when we will be providing second doses, but in terms of the details of it we'll have to get those and follow up with you. Thank you, Caitlin.

**Cristi Moore:** This is Cristi again, I just wanted to mention as far as the fairgrounds, we actually had a media question about this earlier today. We are calling everyone who attended the fairgrounds appointment to make that second appointment. We'll be reaching out to them this week. Thank you all, in closing, for joining us for this important update we will continue our ongoing vaccine conversation on Wednesday. This concludes today's briefing, thank you.