

2020 Local story # 2: COVID vaccines roll out across Gallup, Navajo Nation

Written by By Kevin Opsahl Sun Correspondent
Friday, 08 January 2021 08:32

When the first coronavirus vaccines were distributed to Crownpoint Health Care Facility Dec. 14, it created “a lot of excitement” and “anxious feelings,” according to U.S. Public Health Service Lt. Kali Autrey, a pharmacist clinician.

But more than that, a health official at the hospital in McKinley County was compelled to have the vaccines “blessed.”

“It was beautiful,” Autrey said.

Within minutes, she volunteered to be the first to take the COVID-19 vaccine. The shots were the first to be distributed to health care centers around the country, including those within the Indian Health Services, thanks to the Trump Administration’s Operation Warp Speed.

“I guess I was thinking this is a ray of hope for us,” Autrey, 29, said, adding that the experience was like any other vaccine she had received. “This is light at the end of the tunnel, finally.”

Autrey guessed that as of Dec. 15, around 200 health care workers at Crownpoint had been vaccinated.

“I would say that’s a pretty good chunk; I was pleasantly surprised,” she said. “Most of our employees are wanting to get the vaccine. You know, there’s been a lot of controversy around it.”

Autrey said she is saddened by “our state of affairs right now.” She urged members of the public to get the vaccine.

“[It is] nothing to be afraid of. I would hope that our community members wouldn’t take some of that disinformation and [use it as a reason to] avoid getting the vaccine,” she added.

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Her experience after getting it is that “life is normal.”

“The biggest thing that I noticed was a little arm tenderness, which is to be expected,” Autrey said.

These vaccinations come as over 19,000 Navajo people have tested positive for COVID-19, and just over 700 have died, as of Dec. 15, according to the Nation’s health department.

On the same day Crownpoint received its vaccines, shipments also arrived at the Gallup Indian Medical Center.

IHS officials and members of the Navajo Nation held conference calls just days before the vaccine was shipped to help explain how the shots would be distributed. The Navajo Nation received 3,900 doses from Pfizer and another 7,300 came from Moderna.

The head of Navajo Nation Health Services said Dec. 10 that among the Nation’s hospitals, Gallup Indian Medical Center would be first to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

In an interview with the *Gallup Sun*, U.S. Public Health Service Lt. Cmdr. Erica Harker, IHS Navajo Area pharmacy consultant, said GIMC was chosen for its ultra-cold freezer technology which is needed to store the vaccine once it arrives.

Immediately after shipment, the vaccines were placed in a freezer with a temperature between -80 and -60 degrees Celsius, according to the FDA. The shots are not to be moved, exposed to warmer temperatures, or to light until they’re ready to be administered.

The vaccines can be thawed in a refrigerator or at room temperature once removed from the sub-zero freezer, the FDA said.

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In an interview, Harker could not say where exactly in the GIMC the vaccine is being kept for reasons of safety and security.

“We’re concerned about the safety of our health care workers and the safety of its [the vaccine’s] storage because the vaccine is not readily available for the entire population yet,” Harker said.

Harker said no health workers at GIMC received a coronavirus shot on Dec. 14, but they were scheduled to get them the next day.

“There’s a lot of logistical things that occur prior to the shipment of the vaccine,” Harker explained. She said each health care facility must meet stringent data management requirements before it can qualify to receive the vaccine.

“There is an electronic system that is required by the [Centers for Disease Control] called a ‘Vaccine Management Administration System’ where appointments are made by the health care worker,” Harker said.

The Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine is to be taken in two doses, she noted, and the second one should come in about three weeks. But Navajo health officials have been planning for the Moderna shipment, too, and she said she hoped to receive information on that soon.

Dr. Loretta Christensen, chief medical officer of Navajo Indian Area Health Services, said during an online town hall that Navajo Nation is in the “early or limited dose phase” of the vaccine. This phase covers health care workers, EMS staff, traditional practitioners and everyone in long-term care facilities.

There are different sub-groups of people who fall into this category, she said, including essential workers, like those in food distribution and utility work and people with high risk medical conditions.

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“I think we’re all very happy that the vaccine has progressed along a good timeline and they’re actually early,” Christensen said. “We feel fortunate that this will be available for all of you earlier than we expected.”

The groups in phase one are expected to receive their vaccines before the end of the year. The vaccine will not be more widely distributed until 2021, Christensen said. That would cover “more of the general population.”

Christensen said the last phase would be when the vaccine “becomes more regular, like the flu vaccine,” and may be given as needed.

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