

From criticism to praise

Written by By Kevin Opsahl Sun Correspondent
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Gallup senator cheers vaccination distribution

After publicly decrying Gov. Michelle Lynn Lujan Grisham for her coronavirus vaccine strategy, a local lawmaker now says the state is doing a much better job getting the shots to one of the cities hit hardest by the pandemic.

Sen. George K. Muñoz, D-Gallup, made the comments to the *Gallup Sun* earlier this week, saying the situation has “immensely improved.”

“Our death rate was actually triple what it was of everybody else,” Muñoz said. “They were giving out vaccines based on population, so it wasn’t quite fair. We were more vulnerable than other people. That’s why, I think, we needed to get it there.”

When he became aware of the discrepancy, Muñoz asked Grisham’s office for help. But he claims he got the runaround.

“Everyone said, ‘I’ll call you back.’ Nobody did,” Muñoz said. “At some point, you have to make sure they realize what you’re talking about, and that’s when the press release went out.”

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His office sent out a statement to the media and he was interviewed by print and television outlets about his concerns.

But Muñoz told the *Gallup Sun* that he learned soon after that one of the reasons vaccine supply in his area was low, was because Rehoboth McKinley Christian Hospital lacked the ultra-low temperature storage needed to store the shots.

According to the FDA, the Pfizer BioNTech vaccine must be stored in a freezer between -80 degrees and -60 degrees Celsius. If the freezer is not available, the thermal dry ice containers the vaccines come in may be used as temporary storage.

“The freezers that they had weren’t going to the 80 below temperatures,” Muñoz said, referring to RMCH. “Once they admitted the freezers weren’t working, then that explains why we weren’t getting enough shots.”

Hospital spokeswoman Ina Burmeister disputed the claims.

“Before the vaccine, we didn’t have that [ultra-cold] refrigerator, but ordered it as soon as we knew that’s what was needed.”

RMCH ordered the freezer back in October, due to “high demand,” and it arrived at the hospital on Jan. 5, she said. Officials tested the freezer for seven days before storing the vaccines.

But that’s where Muñoz’s claim about the hospital not getting enough vaccines falls flat, Burmeister said.

“When we got the vaccine, we had initially ordered a large amount. However, we changed that to a smaller amount, because we were testing the freezer to make sure that the temperature

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would stay the same,” she said. “Our pharmacist did not want to waste any vaccine; he wanted to make sure the fridge was staying at the temperature it needed to stay at before we ordered a big dose.”

The pharmacist called the state and changed the vaccine order to a smaller amount — from 975 doses to 450, according to Burmeister.

“Which we used up within the timeframe you could use it, because these were doses that were thawed,” she said.

The *Gallup Sun* reached out to Muñoz and his office about the hospital’s response to his claims, but the senator did not immediately respond.

Based on what Muñoz observed in the community over the weekend, vaccine distribution and clinics have increased.

“This weekend, they had mass vaccinations all over Gallup and [McKinley] County and they began to roll them out,” he said.

Muñoz emphasized the disparity between the number of shots given to his community vs. the actual death rate.

“If we’re dying at a higher rate, and they’re saying, ‘oh, because they have more population, we’re giving them more doses — don’t you want to split some of that off and get your death rate lower?’” the senator said. “I’m not a physician or anything, but it seems to me If you have the highest death rate in the state, that’s where you would target [the vaccines] and not say, ‘well, it’s population-based, so you’re not going to get as many.’”

In response to questions from the *Gallup Sun*, Matt Bieber, a spokesman for the New Mexico Department of Health, wrote in an email his agency is “working to onboard providers into the

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state's vaccination distribution system as quickly as possible."

"The goal remains the same: to distribute vaccines to those who are most exposed to COVID and most vulnerable to its effects," Bieber wrote. "Doing so involves working closely with providers and weighing a range of factors."

Those factors include population size in New Mexico's cities and counties, provider capacity, ultra-low temperature storage capacity and the number of orders placed for vaccines.

Pressed specifically by the *Gallup Sun* on whether it was contradictory to have a strategy that targeted both population size and need, Bieber said no.

"We're distributing vaccines to those who are at greatest risk of COVID-related disease and death – but of course, we have to ensure that we have providers capable of distributing those doses, cold storage facilities capable of storing them, etc.," he wrote.

According to the NMDOH's "vaccine dashboard," which provides up-to-date statistics on the vaccines and the locations where people can get them, there are 530,124 people who have registered, 266,025 doses received and 225,496 doses given as of the evening of Jan. 27.

Local vaccine providers in Gallup/McKinley County include Walmart, RMCH, and the DOH Public Health Office. DOH also administers clinics in partnership with other organizations, Bieber said.

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