From:	Stacey Wood
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December 22, 2020
Media Release
Buncombe County Public Health Administers Phase 1a COVID-19 Vaccines to First Responders

After months of anticipation and planning, Buncombe County Health and Human Services (BCHHS) is administering its first round of COVID-19 vaccines beginning this week. Buncombe County received 700 doses of the Moderna vaccine Monday afternoon. On Tuesday, December 22, 2020, paramedics, firefighters, and public health staff working at the testing and vaccinations sites were given their first dose in the two part COVID vaccination series. Vaccinators will administer the COVID vaccine to over 200 first responders and public health staff this week.

Buncombe County Public Health Director Stacie Saunders acknowledges the importance of the moment and this first vaccine administration: "Receiving the vaccine on Monday was a welcomed and wonderful holiday gift. We are a part of history right now, and what this vaccine represents now and in the future is significant in so many ways. We still have months of hard work that will require all of us to continue to follow the existing precautions as we move to get more and more people vaccinated."

BCHHS Public Health and Emergency Services will continue to administer the vaccine to those who are in Phase 1a as the vaccine arrives. People getting vaccinated must register in an immunization registry system to ensure that they receive the right vaccine both times and are given a card with their vaccine information to present at each vaccination event. Protection from the vaccine is not immediate; the currently available vaccines require 2 doses each and it will take 1-2 weeks following the 2nd dose to be considered fully vaccinated. The individuals who are getting immunized today will come back for their second round in approximately 28 days.

BCHHS will follow the 5-phase distribution plan recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS). This plan was developed by independent state and federal public health advisory committees and is anchored by the State's guiding principles for the pandemic response, including a foundational equity framework.

Vaccine distribution will take place in the following phases:
Phase 1a

- Frontline health care workers with high risk of exposure to or caring for COVID-19 and those living or working in long-term care facilities.

Phase 1b

- Adults with 2 or more chronic conditions that put them at risk of severe illness as defined by the CDC.
- Adults at high risk of exposure including front line workers, health care workers, those living in prisons, homeless shelters, migrant and fishery housing who have 2 or more chronic conditions.
- Those working in prisons, jails, and homeless shelters.

Phase 2

- Essential frontline workers, health care workers, and those living in prisons, homeless shelters, or migrant and fishery housing.
- Adults 65 and above.
- Adults under 65 with one chronic condition that puts them at risk of severe illness as defined by the CDC.

Phase 3

- College and university students.
- K-12 students when there is an approved vaccine for children.
- Those employed in jobs that are critical to society and at lower risk of exposure.

Phase 4

- Everyone who wants a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccination.

Taylor Jones, Buncombe County Emergency Services Director, expects that many will be ready and willing to take the vaccine when it is their turn. "We are working through the priority population for the vaccine now to protect those who care for others by providing medical care and saving lives," he said. "I am hopeful that our friends, neighbors, and loved ones will be encouraged by the news of the vaccine and will strongly consider getting immunized when it is available. I am relieved that our first responders are leading the charge in public health."

Buncombe County health officials continue to work with a diverse group of community partners to ensure a timely, comprehensive, and equitable COVID response plan. "We are grateful for the many partnerships in place that have helped us to provide COVID testing and immunizations for our community," said Saunders. "While an end is in sight for this pandemic, we must hang on and continue to follow the public health measures such as the 3Ws. Vaccinated people should continue to follow all current guidance to protect themselves and others such as wearing a face covering, social distancing, and handwashing as well as avoiding crowds and quarantining after an exposure and limiting contact with others to the extent that you are able. All of these steps together will help us get back to more normal times."
For more information on COVID-19 testing and vaccine in Buncombe County, visit www.buncomberready.org.

Media Partners: Please see this link for pictures and video from the vaccination event on December 22, 2020.

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Stacey Wood
Communications Team | Public Information Officer
Buncombe County Health & Human Services
Media Line: (828) 775-1321
Media Email: HHSPIO@buncombecounty.org