

First doses of COVID-19 vaccine arrive in New Mexico

Written by By Cody Begaye For the Sun
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It has been nearly one year since the COVID-19 pandemic that disrupted life across the world began. But now, it appears there is finally a light at the end of the tunnel.

Dr. Tracie Collins, the newly-appointed cabinet secretary for the New Mexico Department of Health, began a video update on NMDOH's Facebook page on Dec. 15 by saying she has good news.

"The very first doses of the Pfizer vaccine have arrived in New Mexico, with more arriving today and tomorrow [Dec. 16-17]," Collins said, adding the state expects to receive 17,550 doses with this first shipment. NMDOH has plans in motion to issue the doses to over 30 New Mexico hospitals.

"Today we begin to turn the tide, protecting ourselves and our communities and moving past this virus towards a better day," Collins continued.

Collins recapped how the state got to this point with the vaccine. On Dec. 11, after a thorough review of the safety and efficacy of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, the Food and Drug Administration granted an Emergency Use Authorization [EUA]. Then on Dec. 12, an advisory to the Centers for Disease Control concurred with the EUA.

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New Mexico's medical advisory team reviewed the vaccine development research and also concurred with the FDA and CDC. The approved vaccine is now being distributed to predetermined locations throughout the state with the first shots being given on Dec. 14.

Collins said the first shipment of 17,550 doses has been prioritized for frontline healthcare workers in hospital settings, beginning with staff that are high or medium-risk for exposure to the virus.

"As New Mexico receives additional shipments in the coming weeks, we will continue to provide the vaccine to frontline healthcare workers as well as staff and residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities," Collins said.

She added the principle of distribution is simple: the first doses will go to people who are most at-risk of exposure to infected people or infectious materials.

Collins gave other information she said the public should know.

First, like other COVID-19 vaccines in development, the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine requires two injections, with the second shot being issued 21 days after the first.

Second, while the vaccine prevents COVID-19 infection, research is still being done to determine whether it prevents transmission.

"This means as New Mexicans begin to get vaccinated, we still need to wear masks, maintain six-foot social distancing, wash our hands often, and keep up with other COVID-safe practices," Collins said. "This is a very important point: even after getting vaccinated, we need everyone to wear masks and follow those safe practices."

As other COVID-19 vaccines move through development and seek safety and efficacy approval, such as the Moderna vaccine, NMDOH will provide updates.

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“But for now, I hope we can all savor this most promising and uplifting moment,” Collins said. “For the past nine months, the coronavirus has wreaked havoc across our state, around the country, and throughout the world.”

Per the vaccination plan available on NMDOH’s website, the vaccine will be issued in phases.

Phase 1 includes long-term care facilities and first responders like EMS and fire paramedics. It also includes those staff members who conduct COVID-19 testing. Later in Phase 1, inmates, individuals with disabilities in group homes, and residential treatment centers will be vaccinated.

In the transition from Phase 1 to 2, the state will include older patients and those with underlying conditions. Then in Phase 3, the plan is for all New Mexicans who want a COVID-19 vaccine to be able to get it.

The full rollout of the vaccine is a process that will take many months and require much patience to complete, Collins added.

“[But] as I said at the outset, today we begin to turn the tide, protecting ourselves and our communities and moving towards a brighter day. We will get there. Thank you, New Mexico,” she said.

***By Cody Begaye
For the Sun***