

D.C.-area hospitals grapple with Covid vaccine logistics

By [Sara Gilgore](#) – Staff Reporter, Washington Business Journal
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Greater Washington health systems are receiving and administering the first doses of Pfizer Inc.'s Covid-19 vaccine after weeks of preparation and coordination across their organizations, marking a new phase of the pandemic as coronavirus case counts continue to rise throughout the region.

It's added up to a massive, intricate logistical effort — likely the largest of its kind, certainly in recent years — for local hospitals that have already been operating at extremely high capacities through the coronavirus pandemic.

“We know there’s still a tunnel ahead, but there’s a very bright light at the end of the tunnel right now that we didn’t have until these vaccines were here,” said Dr. [Stephen Jones](#), president and CEO of Inova Health System.

It's go time

Inova was among the D.C.-area hospitals that started vaccinating health care workers Wednesday — more than 500 staff members had received their first doses as of mid-afternoon. About one-third of Inova's eligible workforce, approximately 6,000 employees, are signed up to receive the vaccine during this first phase.

Virginia Hospital Center received its first shipments Monday morning, executed a test run with a handful of its emergency department and intensive-care unit nurses later that day, and intended to administer 500 shots Wednesday — with five people involved in giving one dose about every five minutes. By Saturday, the independent Arlington facility would have given 1,950 vaccinations, according to VHC Chief Nursing Officer and Senior Vice President [Melody Dickerson](#).

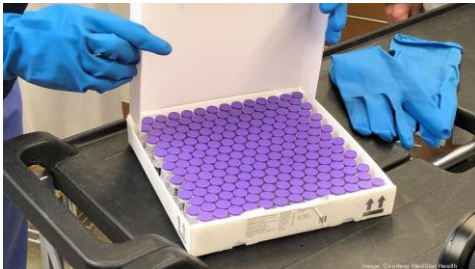
“We line people up so they have an appointment so we can make sure we have the right number of people, so we don't waste any vaccine,” Dickerson said. “Because once you access the vial, you really only have about six hours to use it.”

That's the guidance from the government and Pfizer, which included step-by-step instructions about handling the vaccine “from the point it arrives to your hospital to the administering point,” Dickerson said.

Columbia, Maryland-based MedStar Health also started its vaccinations for D.C. staff Wednesday, after its D.C. hospitals — MedStar Georgetown University Hospital and MedStar Washington Hospital Center — got their initial shipments, stored the vaccines at the required ultracold temperatures and started working with pharmacy partners to prepare the vials in the days leading up to this point.

That process also involved establishing a documentation system to track inventory, [Christina Hughes](#), director of system preparedness for MedStar Health, said in a recorded video interview provided by MedStar.

“I think it’s really an opportunity for us to move forward and to get our teams vaccinated and to be able to assist really the greater community at large in getting this pandemic under control and getting everyone — our associates, our patients, their families and our communities — back to their daily lives as they’d like to see them,” said Hughes, who’s overseeing vaccine logistics for MedStar.



MedStar Georgetown University Hospital is among the D.C.-area hospitals that received shipments of vaccine vials this week.

How hospitals geared up to get here

The dissemination comes after a multistep progression that included securing the necessary equipment, identifying vaccination locations, activating the supply chain to get the product to those sites, educating staff about that process and scheduling their first and second doses, according to [Bonnie Levin](#), assistant vice president for pharmacy services at MedStar. “The whole process of setting this up has been a very complex logistical issue,” she said in a recorded video interview provided by MedStar.

VHC purchased an ultracold storage fridge a few months ago “as soon as we heard word that Pfizer was developing a vaccine that required it,” Dickerson said. “It was something that we did not have; most hospitals do not have a fridge like that, so we made that investment,” which amounted to about \$14,500, she said, adding that they’re now back-ordered because of the widespread need.

That’s just a fraction of the financial investment the region’s health systems have made in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Silver Spring-based Holy Cross Health — which received a package of syringes and ancillary supplies early Wednesday and was expecting its vaccine shipment later in the day — said it has spent \$4 million to support the needs of its Covid patients to date. Of that, more than half went toward labor, including traveling nurses, another cost that has hit hospitals hard as those workers’ salaries can escalate about 40% with demand across the U.S., said Dr. [Lou Damiano](#), president of Holy Cross.

“We certainly are paying overtime and the like to get people to do this and not take away from the care that’s being delivered to our patients here in the hospital,” Dickerson said.



Melody Dickerson is senior vice president and chief nursing officer of Virginia Hospital Center.

Who’s next in the Covid vaccine hierarchy?

The hospitals have to determine which front-line workers receive the vaccine first. VHC prioritized staffers who come in contact with Covid-positive patients, such as physicians who respond to ER calls, obstetrics doctors on call for labor, and environmental service providers who clean Covid units, Dickerson said.

Holy Cross created a randomized list by priority level — for instance, ranking ER nurses, physicians and registrars in the first group, according to Chief

Strategy Officer [Kristin Feliciano](#). “We are not requiring the vaccination but we are strongly encouraging colleagues, medical staff and community members to take the vaccine so that we can bring this pandemic to an end,” she said in an email to the Washington Business Journal.

<https://www.bizjournals.com/washington/news/2020/12/16/a-covid-vaccine-is-arriving-here-s-how-hospitals.html>

Going forward, these organizations plan to continue vaccine distribution per guidance from their jurisdictions. What that will look like at Inova is unclear, however, according to Jones. "There are still some unknowns because we don't know where those doses will come," Jones said, "so we stand ready to do our part in any way that we can."

In the meantime, during this first phase, Holy Cross expects regular vaccine shipments of increasing quantities over the coming weeks, Feliciano said. "Once colleagues and medical staff have been vaccinated, and our ongoing work with our partner nursing homes is underway, we will align with the county and state to support vaccination of community members," she said. "At this point, we envision we will be setting up a drive-thru vaccination clinic for the community." Hospitals are also laying groundwork ahead of a possible regulatory approval of another Covid-19 vaccine from Moderna Inc., which requires different storage and timelines — and, thus, another set of schedules. That's all as a second wave of Covid cases hits the region. Hospitals say fewer patients are requiring ICU care nowadays, due in part to new medications and clinical practices, but they say case counts are climbing. Inova has roughly half as many coronavirus patients as in the spring, Jones said. VHC is seeing 75% of its spring surge volume, Dickerson said. "We don't expect things to really start to taper down until probably February," she said.

That makes prevention measures outside of the vaccine just as important, Jones said. "Vaccines aren't the only solution here. We need to continue to mask and socially distance and practice hand hygiene for quite some time."