

Some Vaccines Are Available but What to Do?

BY SHIRLEY RUHE
ARLINGTON CONNECTION

You know you are 75 years old. You know that puts you in Gov. Ralph Northam's tier 1(b) to get the coronavirus vaccine. Beyond that you don't know much of anything for sure.

Northam on Jan. 6 announced new actions to help providers accelerate the rate of vaccinations with a goal to vaccinate 25,000 Virginians each day when supply allows and expanding the priority groups. It was accompanied by a pyramid diagram outlining the population priorities for vaccinations. Arlington coronavirus cases stand at 10,117 with 687 hospitalized and 186 deaths with Virginia topping its previous numbers the last five days in a row.

Vaccines are being made available to tiers 1a, including healthcare workers and residents of long-term facilities, and to 1b including persons aged 75 and older and frontline essential workers.

But there is a lot of confusion about how many vaccines are available, who qualifies, where and how to get them. The vaccine is not currently available to the general public.

Mitch Opalski, Director of SYNERGY HomeCare, located in Arlington and serving the Northern Virginia area, says his 100 health care professionals have been calling individually for appointments, and being put two hours on hold on the hotline. And some are immigrants and are asked 40 questions "which is intimidating in this atmosphere."

He says, "I don't know why they can't go to a central location, like CVS is doing, or even come to my office to be vaccinated as a group." Opalski has gone to County Board Chair Libby Garvey for a solution but so far no solution with things moving so fast.

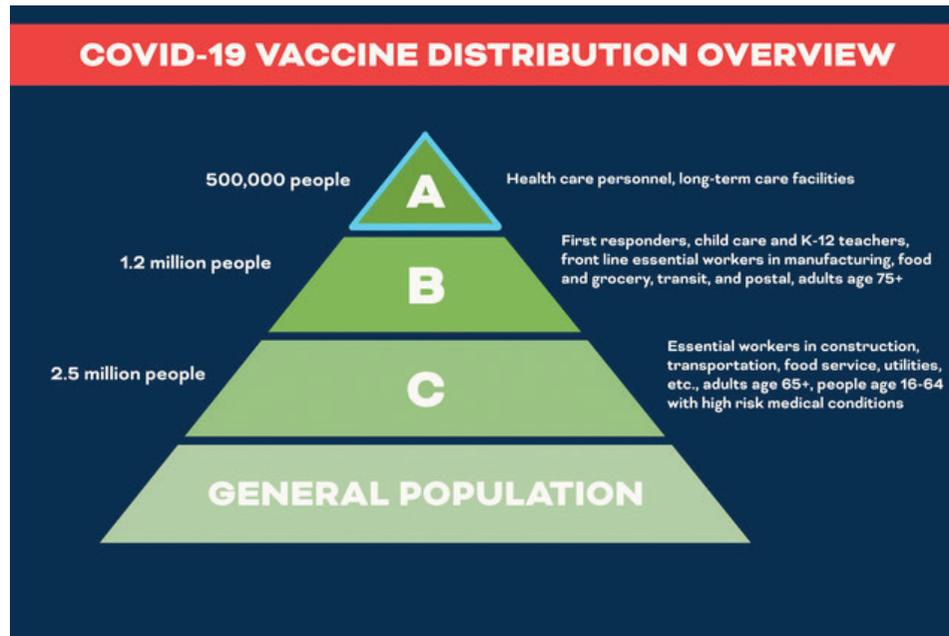
Adrian Stanton, Vice President of Virginia Hospital Center Health Systems, says they received Pfizer vaccines in December and sent out a notice to their health care workers asking them to sign up if they wanted the vaccine.

They set up time slots Wednesday-Saturday of that week for the vaccinations. "After the vaccination, we sent each person away with a notecard to come back in 21 days."

When the Moderna vaccine came in on Dec. 28, VHC repeated the

process. Now they are on the second batch for the first group to receive the shot. "Every bit of vaccine we've received we've used. We have been assured we will get enough vaccine for the second shots." Stanton says close to 5,000 doses have been administered, but it's a constantly changing number. "We have a clinic going on right now with a line out there."

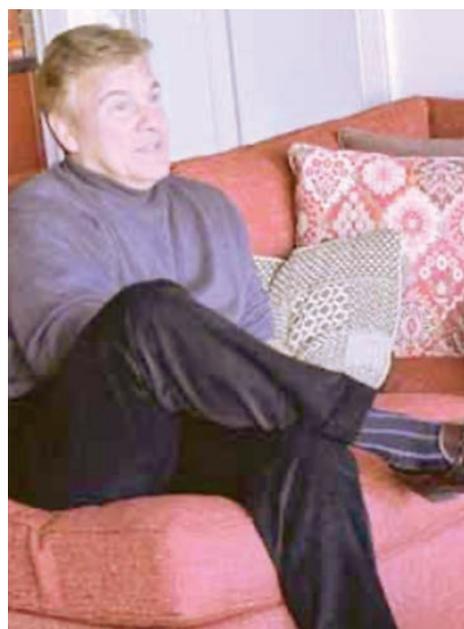
Since there was only a general definition of medical workers, Virginia Hospital Center created an internal definition for vaccination priority by setting up tiers 1, 2 and 3 depending on how closely the medical worker worked with COVID patients. They set up a vaccination procedure to sign up, assign a time slot, get checked off, receive the vaccine and then spend 15 minutes in



Governor Ralph Northam released a COVID-19 vaccine distribution overview on Jan. 6.



VHC partners with Arlington Free Clinic to vaccinate 50 essential workers on Jan. 11.



Mitch Opalski, Director of SYNERGY HomeCare.

the auditorium socially distanced to watch for potential reactions. "We played movies, like 'The Grinch' I think, so the person would have something to do while they were waiting. We did a test of our procedure ahead of time to be sure it worked."

He says it takes a lot of manpower to handle the process from at least six staff doing the vaccinations.

Plus it took others to handle the registra-

tion, facilitation of the check in and traffic flow and watching folks afterwards. "They can't be crowded together." He says Virginia Hospital Center has been vaccinating 500 people a day.

But the hospital is seeing a spike in Covid-19 cases after the post holiday season similar to the one after Thanksgiving. "We are expecting at least two more weeks of increased cases." He says it is taking a toll on health care workers that were already pretty worn out in November and have never had a break.

Now Virginia Hospital Center is partnering with Arlington County to operate a vaccination clinic for residents over the age of 75 as the county moves into Phase 1b of the Virginia Department of Health vaccine distribution plan. Virginia Hospital Center will also continue to offer the COVID-19 vaccine to healthcare personnel who meet the criteria defined as the highest priority in Phase 1a of the Virginia Department of Health vaccine distribution plan. Vaccines will be available by appointment only. Arlington residents over the age of 75 who have scheduled an appointment will begin receiving vaccines Jan. 13. Appointments are available via the VHC website. www.virginiahospitalcenter.com/patients-visitors/safe-care-with-us/covidvaccine/

Virginia Hospital Center has received doses of both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines and has the infrastructure in place to store

and administer either vaccine. Additional information about the COVID-19 vaccine plans for Arlington County can be found on the Arlington County website.

COMMENTS, BELOW, from a neighborhood internet network, illustrate the complexity of the process.

"We know we are all in the age group to get vaccinated next. Keep me in the loop if you find out anything."

"Virginia Hospital Center has just sent me a notice this morning that they are now scheduling vaccinations for individuals who are part of the Phase 1a and 1b populations. It says appointments are required and there will be a high demand so the number of available appointments is based on the quantity of vaccines they receive."

"I got a slot for this Wednesday in about 10 minutes from VHC but the slots are going fast. By the time I got through the process four time slots on the same day had already been gobbled up."

"I have tried and tried and I can't get on the VHC website, even as a guest. They say they will send me a code to get into the system but it just doesn't come."

"I got into VHC as a guest but they wanted all of this medical information and I decided to just wait for Kaiser. Besides I don't want to go to the Shirlington site where they are sending people."

"Wait a minute, Libby Garvey just sent around a notice with a link to apply for a vaccination."

"I have been able to get registered but the Garvey site says they will send me a time slot later."

"Finally after dinner I got an appointment for my husband and myself on Jan. 23; sure took a lot of time but I did get it. I got one for my husband but I had to go back in to be sure I had one for me too. I couldn't tell."

"VHC seems to have opened another site tonight so I am trying again. Still loading but I got further this time. Wonder if their site crashed. Wow, I ended up with three appointments. I'll have to call Monday and cancel 2 of them."

"You know my neighbor told me she was at our local Safeway the other night and an announcement came on asking if anyone wanted the COVID vaccine. So she went back and got it. Turns out Safeway had vaccinated all of their people and had vaccine left. You know it was like that story on tv."

"Anyone know how to get an appointment for my housekeeper who doesn't have a computer? I wonder how the vulnerable elderly living alone without much outside contact know what to do."

Finally 10 hours later everyone had successfully made an appointment for a vaccination with the first beginning on Wednesday, Jan. 13 and the last on Jan. 23.

Stanton says it is important to know that getting the vaccine doesn't mean you can immediately do anything you want. He says you still have to wear a mask, socially distance and wash your hands. "You can't let your guard down."

PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

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