



St. Mary's provides first doses of COVID-19 vaccine

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Athens and Lavonia, Ga. – As part of the nationwide effort to end the COVID-19 pandemic, St. Mary's received a partial shipment of the COVID-19 vaccine Monday and began administering it to front-line colleagues and providers. Among those working to administer the shots was St. Mary's President and CEO Montez Carter, a licensed pharmacist.



Elizabeth Jean-Noel, a nurse practitioner with Infection Disease Specialists of Athens, receives the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine from Resident Physician Dr. Marjory Pesek at St. Mary's Hospital Monday

“We are excited about the safety and effectiveness of this first vaccine and others that are going through the FDA review and approval process,” Carter said. “These vaccines hold the promise to end the COVID-19 pandemic and save lives.”

Among the first of more than 50 colleagues and providers to receive the vaccine at St. Mary's Hospital in Athens were Elizabeth Jean-Noel, a nurse practitioner with Infectious Disease Specialists of Athens; Margarita Osorito, Emergency Department nurse; Kelly Porter, respiratory therapist; Dr. Nehal Bhatt, pulmonologist and critical care physician; Dr. Clay Chappell, interventional cardiologist; Barbara Kelley, nurse and director of St. Mary's Intensive Care Unit, Dr. David Gaines, family practitioner, and Dr. Adam Trill, hospitalist.



St. Mary's Sacred Heart Hospital Emergency Department nurse practitioner Ruth Tellano Daniel receives one of the first doses of vaccine from Emergency Department Manager Tyler Davison

At St. Mary's Sacred Heart Hospital in Lavonia, where nearly 20 were vaccinated, the first vaccine recipients included Dr. Kenneth Carroll, OB/GYN; Paula Carroll, certified nurse anesthetist; Ruth Tellano Daniel, Emergency Department nurse practitioner; Diana Elliott, nuclear medicine tech; Brenda Powell, nurse and

manager of the Mother/Baby Unit; Dr. Richard White, Chief of Staff, and Dr. Morgan Wood, Emergency Department medical director.

Because of the logistics of properly shipping and handling the Pfizer vaccine, which requires ultra-cold storage – 76 degrees below zero or colder – St. Mary's Good Samaritan Hospital in Greensboro is planning to hold its first colleague vaccine clinic on Tuesday.

In these initial stages, while vaccine supply is very limited, St. Mary's is following state guidelines for determining which colleagues receive the vaccine first. At the top of the priority list are colleagues who provide face-to-face care to large numbers of patients with COVID, including physicians, advanced practice clinicians, and staff in units such as the Emergency Department and ICU. Next priority will be patient-facing staff who provide care to large numbers of patients not known or suspected to have COVID.

"It's something of a miracle that science has delivered a safe and effective vaccine in just a year from the eruption of a deadly new virus," said Dr. Jason Smith, St. Mary's Chief Medical Officer. "The key was the work done on messenger RNA vaccines over the past two decades, driven by the need to fight other novel viruses such as MERS and SARS. That research led to the development of this new generation of vaccines, which use mRNA to teach the body's immune system how to recognize and fight the virus without having to use any of the virus itself in the vaccine."

The first doses delivered to St. Mary's were manufactured by Pfizer. St. Mary's has also requested hundreds of doses of a vaccine developed by the Moderna pharmaceutical company, which was approved by the FDA Friday for emergency use and does not require ultra-cold storage. In all, St. Mary's has asked the State of Georgia to provide enough vaccine to vaccinate all colleagues, medical group providers, and credentialed physicians. In addition, St. Mary's is working with Farmer's Drugs of Oconee County to provide vaccinations to residents of Highland Hills Village, a retirement community that provides memory care, assisted living, and independent living to senior adults.

Carter noted that vaccinating enough of the population to stop the spread of COVID-19 will take time.

"With the start of vaccination, we can see the light at the end of the tunnel, but we're not out of the tunnel yet," he said. "With the holidays starting and COVID rates continuing to rise in our state and region, it's more important than ever for the whole community to redouble their efforts to fight this virus."

Carter said it will be necessary to stay vigilant for several months by continuing to wear a mask in public, keeping good social distance, and avoiding large gatherings. Other measures, such as washing hands often, sanitizing surfaces, and staying home if feeling sick, are effective at fighting all kinds of viral illnesses, including the flu, and should become a regular part of daily living.

"We know all these steps can slow or even stop the spread of COVID-19 and prevent hospitals from becoming overwhelmed," he said. "We need to mount one last push to keep each other safe while our nation and world vaccinate billions of people, and then we can put this pandemic behind us."

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