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Public Health
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Berkshire County MA

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COVID-19 Vaccination in Berkshire County: First Responders Become the Next Group to be Vaccinated

Since mid-December, thousands of COVID-facing healthcare workers in Berkshire County have been vaccinated by Berkshire Health Systems and vaccinations among long-term care residents and workers has begun through the Federal Pharmacy Partnership Program. Mass vaccination clinics for First Responders (Fire, Police and EMS) are expected to begin the week of January 11, 2021. This effort is coordinated by Berkshire County Boards of Health Association (BCBOHA) which represents the 32 local boards of health in the county and operates under its fiscal host Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC). BCBOHA is working in collaboration with response partners including the Berkshire Public Health Alliance, Berkshire Medical Center, Fairview Hospital, the City of Pittsfield, Northern Berkshire EMS, County Ambulance, Tri-Town Health Department, Great Barrington Health Department, North Adams Health Department and Williamstown Health Department and others in the county and state.

Pending delivery of vaccine from the Mass Department of Public Health (DPH), vaccination clinics for first responders will be held the week of January 11 in Great Barrington, Pittsfield and North Adams. Local Boards of Health have been planning for Emergency Dispensing Sites (EDS) for many years and will use these plans as the basis for mass vaccination clinics for first responders and others as the COVID vaccine effort rolls out. The first responder clinics will be managed by Northern Berkshire EMS and the Northern Berkshire Regional Emergency Planning Committee (REPC) in North Adams, the City of Pittsfield and the Berkshire Public Health Alliance in Pittsfield and Fairview Hospital in Great Barrington in collaboration with the county’s emergency response partners above.

“As we all know, vaccine approval has occurred and the next phase for boards of health is collaborating as a county to preplan for vaccine distribution and inoculation.” Said Jim Wilusz, RS, Executive Director of the Tri-Town Health Department which covers Lenox, Lee and Stockbridge. “While this a major heavy lift we want to assure the community that we are prepared to handle this responsibility as a collective team effort. Please check town websites for future details and in the meantime, please continue to practice universal precautions including social distancing, masking, washing hands and limiting exposure/travel to large gatherings outside of your family bubble”

Following First Responder clinics, the next priority groups in Phase 1 are expected to include Congregate Care, including corrections and shelters, Home Health Workers, and non-COVID facing health care workers. Home Health Workers are also expected to be vaccinated through the efforts of local public health and its partners in the county.

For information on Phase 2 and Phase 3 groups, which will begin vaccinations no earlier than February and continue through the spring, individuals should consult the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) website at: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/when-can-i-get-the-covid-19-vaccine>. This website is updated at least twice a week, and the priority groups are changing rapidly in response to changing information and

federal guidance, so people are encouraged to check back often.

Following large clinical trials, two vaccines have been confirmed safe and approved for Emergency Use Authorization by the Federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA), one developed and manufactured by Pfizer and the other by Moderna. These vaccines depend on technology that has been under development for many years and following an unprecedented investment of money and personnel at the federal level, allowing rapid development of a vaccine without compromising safety. County partners have the equipment and capacity to store and administer thousands of doses of vaccine by either manufacturer as it is provided by DPH.

A significant minority of individuals vaccinated will experience side effects possibly including a sore arm at the inoculation site, headaches, chills and fever; in a small number of cases these symptoms will be severe enough to keep the vaccinated individual home the day following the vaccination. Most side effects should last no more than 24-36 hours and are normal signs of the body mounting an immune response. A very few people, mostly those with a previous history of anaphylactic allergic reactions, have experienced a severe allergic reaction and were successfully treated at the scene. All public clinics in Berkshire County will have EMS personnel available to administer an epi-pen or other treatment if needed. Those with a history of anaphylaxis should consult their primary care provider before getting vaccinated.

Until everyone has been vaccinated, it is important that everyone continue to wear masks and social distance, so that we continue to protect everyone, including those who have not yet been vaccinated. If you develop symptoms of COVID-19 or have been exposed to someone with COVID-19, you can be tested at no charge at any of the three testing facilities run by Berkshire Health Systems. You can call the Berkshire Health Systems Coronavirus Hotline for testing appointments or any other questions about COVID-19. Nurses are available to take your calls from 8 AM to 4:30 PM seven days per week at 855-BMC-LINK, OR 855-262-5465.

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