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Dept. of Military Affairs: Mobile vaccination teams begin assisting Wisconsin communities

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GREENDALE, Wis. — The state's first mobile vaccination teams began operations this week to assist local health department efforts to administer COVID-19 vaccines across Wisconsin.

The teams, which represent a joint effort of state resources and are made up of Citizen Soldiers and Airmen from the Wisconsin National Guard and vaccinators from the University of Wisconsin system, piloted the program Jan. 19 in Greendale.

Teams have since assisted local health departments in Eau Claire and Baraboo with vaccination clinics as well.

Local and tribal health departments are the lead agencies managing the effort in collaboration with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services and the Wisconsin National Guard.

"The purpose of mobile vaccination teams is to help support and assist our local partners in their vaccination efforts," explained Kay Mittelstadt-Lock, of the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. "Local health departments that may exceed their capacity with staffing, resources, or space can put in a resource request with the State Emergency Operations Center through Wisconsin Emergency Management."

"Each local health department has different capacities and different needs for these vaccination teams and different ways that they're requesting support, and we ensure that those needs are being addressed," she said.

Once a request for assistance is approved at the state level, the state dispatches a mobile vaccination team at the agreed upon date, time, and location. That team consists of four members of the Wisconsin National Guard, who manage many of the administrative aspects of the operation, and two vaccinators – many of whom are University of Wisconsin system students.

The students, who generally are pharmacy students or entering medical fields, get hands-on experience, clinical hours, and potentially some tuition reimbursement, depending on their degree program. The community gets the additional surge capacity it needs to administer more vaccines.

“Vaccinators are in short supply, because those that can vaccinate are busy in the hospitals, and EMS can vaccinate but they’re busy with their responses as well, so we need to reach out to those who aren’t currently working in the health field but can give a vaccine,” Mittelstadt-Lock said.

The mobile vaccination teams assist at points of distribution, or “PODs” – universally designed setups and vaccination processes that are the same no matter the location.

Each POD runs the same way, no matter if it’s in Greendale, Eau Claire, or in another state.

“This is not the first POD that local health has setup,” Mittelstadt-Lock said, noting that public health developed PODs during the H1N1 pandemic and has been using them since. “We’ve been doing this for many years, but COVID-19 requires different protocols. Because of the nature of the virus, it is critical that we are using preventative measures in order to reduce the risk of spreading the virus at these PODs. In addition to leading the coordination of vaccination efforts, local health departments are still contact tracing and doing the work that is necessary to protect their communities from the virus. That means, they may not have the staffing capacity to operate these vaccination sites.”

Enter the Wisconsin National Guard, which offers manpower to assist with staffing the PODs.

Capt. David Eischen, a physician’s assistant in the Wisconsin National Guard who also practices in cardiology in Sheboygan, Wisconsin as a civilian, explained the system.

“You could basically land and set one up, because they use the same terminology and the same kind of setups,” he said. “All that really changes is the physical location that you’re doing it at.”

Each POD has controlled access, with one way in, and one way out. PODs can be open or closed, and in the case of COVID-19 vaccination PODs, they are closed, meaning, only specific entities are allowed into the PODs while administering vaccines.

Five stations make up each POD.

Those receiving the vaccine first encounter a triage station where a greeter ensures that only healthy individuals enter the POD. Those who have COVID-19 symptoms or a pending COVID test are not allowed entry. Where mobile vaccination teams are supporting the local health department, a member of the Wisconsin National Guard performs this function.

A second station serves as a registration and education station where once again, a Wisconsin National Guard member identifies the individual and confirms that the individual is slated to receive the vaccine. They’ll also provide some pre-recorded education on the vaccine, provide a fact sheet on the vaccine, and verify that individuals have their paperwork completed correctly.

In the third step, health professionals will conduct a medical screening, ascertain health history, and make sure that the individual is appropriate to receive the vaccine.

In step four, a vaccinator administers the vaccine, before moving onto the fifth and final step, where National Guard members or other medical personnel observe the patient for 15 to 30 minutes to ensure the individual has no adverse reactions to the vaccine.

According to Eischen, 36 Soldiers and Airmen from the Wisconsin National Guard are currently staffing nine such mobile vaccination teams with four members each. But as the mobile vaccination team concept moves from pilot program to full implementation, the state and the National Guard expect that to grow.

The team administered more than 60 vaccines to unaffiliated health care providers, police, fire and EMS personnel in the area on the first day. By week’s end the teams

had administered nearly 500 vaccines after supporting clinics in Eau Claire, Baraboo, and a second day in Greendale.

The entire vaccination process usually takes approximately 30 minutes per person, with a plan for roughly two appointments every 10 minutes, Eischen said.

“It’s huge for me being a healthcare provider out here through the duration of the COVID response and to be leading teams that are impacting their communities in real time,” Eischen, who has been mobilized for the Wisconsin National Guard’s COVID response since March, said. “Every needle that goes into an arm is one less opportunity for the virus to really take hold. I think we can finally start gaining ground, so that’s the impact for me. That’s why I got up this morning all excited and just to see a larger vision become a reality in real time.”

As the program continues to grow and the state moves to the next phase of the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out, so too will the need for more teams.