

https://www.recorderonline.com/news/rural-areas-no-1-priority-for-vaccines/article_6666a3a4-93ec-11eb-909a-6b7997df8b6f.html

Rural areas No. 1 priority for vaccines

BY CHARLES WHISNAND cwhisnand@portervillerecorder.com

Apr 2, 2021

The Tulare County Health and Human Services Agency announced on Thursday an initiative in which it would make COVID-19 vaccines available to all rural communities in Tulare County by the end of May.

This is in line with HHS's effort to make sure everyone in Tulare County has the chance to be vaccinated.

"Our No. 1 priority is our rural communities," HHS Deputy Director of Administrative Services Krissie Leach said.

Leach talked about how the strategy of providing vaccines to residents has changed since the vaccines first became available in December.

"We had very limited supply and a lot of demand for it," said Leach about the vaccines. But now with vaccine supplies continuing to increase the issue has become more about access, especially for rural communities, Leach said.

The changing dynamics when it comes to providing vaccines has been challenging and has caused the county to constantly reassess its strategy when it comes to providing vaccines. The county has a vaccine advisory committee that participates in a conference call twice a week to assess the county's strategy in providing vaccines.

Various agencies are represented on the committee, including the Tulare County Office of Education, the Tulare County Farm Bureau and CSET. "We definitely couldn't do it without the all hands on deck approach," said Leach about coming up with a strategy to provide vaccines.

She added since the county relies on myturn.ca.gov to register those for its vaccination programs that presents a challenge since many in rural communities in the county don't have internet access. That's where community partners come in to make those in rural areas aware of vaccination events in their communities. Those without internet access and non-English speaking residents can also call 559-685-2260 for assistance. Leach said many in rural communities haven't been able to make it to mass vaccination events at Tulare's International Ag Center or Porterville College.

But vaccination events in rural communities have been well attended, Leach said. "We are getting a lot of traffic at our smaller events," she said. "We're getting a lot of traffic. A lot more traffic than we expected." Leach noted a recent vaccination event in Terra Bella in which 400 people showed up, including about half who walked up.

The county is holding a major three-day vaccination event for agricultural and food workers at the Porterville Fairgrounds April 19 through 20. There will be 3,000 doses of the Johnson and Johnson vaccine, which requires just one shot, that will be administered, Leach said.

Vaccinations will be offered from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday and noon to 7 p.m. Monday and Tuesday.

Agricultural and food employers should have their employees register at <https://myturn.ca.gov/> Limited walk-ups will be accepted for those arriving on buses. The county is also providing free bus rides for those going to vaccine appointments.

And while the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is popular because it requires just one shot, Leach noted the Pfizer vaccine, which requires two shots, is also popular because it can be administered to 16 and 17 year olds. Those receiving Johnson & Johnson and Moderna, which requires two shots, vaccines must be 18 and older.

When talking about the importance of vaccines, Leach said, "I think the importance of the vaccines to us is it's our frontline defense against COVID-19." She said the vaccines are also important when it comes to Tulare County progressing through the tiers "to get our economy back and moving again."

Leach added those in the county need to remain diligent, to continue to wear face masks and practice social distancing as well as being vaccinated.

That point was driven home on Friday when the Tulare County Public Health Branch announced three cases of COVID-19 variants had been found in the county. Two cases of the UK variant, B.1.1.7 and one case of the South African variant, B.1.351 were found.

So residents need to remain diligent when it comes to variants potentially preventing Tulare County from moving through the tiers. Tulare County is in the red tier and is on track to move into the next least restrictive tier, the orange tier, on Tuesday.

"We're not through it yet," said Leach about the COVID pandemic. "But there is a light at the end of the tunnel."