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Firefighters called upon to distribute COVID-19 vaccine

By Nick Marnell

Acknowledging that the initial phase of the COVID-19 vaccination rollout has moved slowly, Contra Costa Health Services announced Jan. 11 that it will use firefighter-paramedics to help distribute the vaccine within the county.

Since mid-December, the county had administered 36,000 doses of the vaccine as of Jan. 15. At that rate, with the county's professed goal of vaccinating 725,000 residents within six months in order to achieve herd immunity levels, the job would not be completed for two years. CCHS says it will require a major escalation of vaccinations to reach the county goal, jumping from approximately 1,200 vaccinations a day to 7,000 a day.

"We continue to redirect every resource available to getting shots in arms," Dr. Ori Tzvieli, Contra Costa County Deputy Health Officer and COVID Operations Chief, said in a statement. "At the same time, we are developing partnerships and networks that will ensure every pharmacy and healthcare provider in the county can provide the vaccine as more and more people are eligible to receive it."

To that end, along with opening more vaccination sites and activating its medical reserve corps, the county will enlist the aid of firefighter-paramedics to ramp up vaccination efforts.

Both the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District and the Moraga-Orinda Fire District are on board to help administer the vaccine. "ConFire is working closely with Contra Costa Health Services to determine how and when our cadre of 300-some EMT and paramedic firefighters can support distribution plans for the COVID-19 vaccines," said Steve Hill, district public information officer. "We are eager to leverage our frontline patient care providers to further the health and safety of the communities we serve across the county."

"Anything we do to assist vaccine distribution will be done in support of County Health's plan," said MOFD Chief Dave Winnacker, though as of mid-January it was too early to say exactly what will be asked of the county fire agencies. The likelihood was that fire personnel would assist with inoculations at the county health sites rather than at independent fire agency locations, the chief said.

The county expects to have administered all of its 72,000 allocated vaccine doses to most members of Phase 1A and 1B priority groups "in the coming days and weeks," Tzvieli said on Jan. 15. Into early January, healthcare workers, employees and residents of long-term care facilities, and people aged 75 and over were eligible to receive the COVID vaccine in Contra Costa County.

On Jan. 13, the state added people 65 and over to the eligibility list, further straining the county distribution network. "We've been getting about 1,000 requests per hour on our website," said Anna Roth, Contra Costa County Health Director.

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

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