

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Frontline Workers are First to Receive Covid-19 Vaccine Shots in the USVI

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Left: Registered Nurse Hope Bagley delivered the first shot to Dr. Jan Tawakol of Plessen Healthcare on St. Croix. Right: Registered Nurse Beranice Wade of Schneider Hospital delivered the first shot to the D.O.H.'s Medical Director Dr. Tai Hunte-Cesar. By. THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

An interventional nephrologist on St. Croix and an infectious disease physician on St. Thomas were among the clinical healthcare staff in the Virgin Islands to receive the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine recently authorized by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the V.I. Department of Health announced Wednesday afternoon.

Minutes after the vaccine shipment was delivered from D.O.H. by the Virgin Islands National Guard, Registered Nurse Hope Bagley delivered the first shot to Dr. Jan Tawakol of Plessen Healthcare on St. Croix. Members of the Plessen staff also received the vaccine at their urgent care office.

On St. Thomas, Registered Nurse Beranice Wade of the Schneider Regional Medical Center delivered the first shot to the Department of Health's Medical Director, Dr. Tai Hunte-Ceasar. Hunte-Ceasar, who is known for being an advocate for vaccinations, was ecstatic about being the first to receive the vaccine in the St Thomas/St. John district.

Nurse practitioners, epidemiologists, registered nurses, and other healthcare staff were among the first Virgin Islanders to receive the vaccine on the first day.

Dr. Tawakol shared what he has witnessed as he saw COVID-19 numbers rise and patients suffer from this dangerous virus. "By vaccination, I think it's very important we realize what tool we have in our hands and all of us take that step to stop this virus," said Dr. Tawakol.

Yesterday, 975 doses of the vaccine arrived on St. Croix and have allowed providers to start Phase 1A vaccinations in both the St. Croix and St. Thomas/St. John district. This phase includes clinical healthcare staff throughout the territory and residents and staff in long-term care facilities per Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommendations, D.O.H. said.

According to the release, as more vaccines are ordered and delivered on a weekly basis, populations in Phases 1B through 1C will begin and will cover first responders, persons with immunocompromised conditions and the 65 and older population. It is expected for the department to roll into subsequent phases on a frequent basis. Additional information about the vaccination phases will be shared with the public in the near future.

The very first vaccinations were livestreamed on Facebook in an effort to show the community healthcare workers are taking the first step to keep this community safe, according to the release. Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said, "Seeing pictures and videos of the first clinical staff receiving the COVID-19 vaccine creates a level of excitement throughout the healthcare community especially knowing that our own Dr. Tai Hunte-Ceasar was one of the first in line to become immunized. The vaccine represents increased immunity against the virus and indeed shines the glimmer of hope that I spoke of--the hope we have been waiting for."

Even with the arrival of the vaccine, the department urges the community to continue to adhere to guidelines and best practices to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and to remain vigilant. This includes practicing good hand hygiene, maintaining physical distance from persons outside of your household, avoiding non-essential travel, and staying home when sick.

The COVID-19 vaccine is set to be available to the general public in early Spring 2021. Visit covid19usvi.com for updates.