

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Vaccination Centers Open in St. Thomas and St. Croix as Territory Races to Goal of 50,000 Shots by July

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Kyle Murphy **March 02, 2021**



UVI Sports and Fitness Center was transformed to a vaccination center Monday. By. KYLE MURPHY FOR VI CONSORTIUM

The University of the Virgin Islands Sports and Fitness Center in St. Thomas, and at the UVI Great Hall on St. Croix, were transformed on Monday to Covid-19 vaccine centers in an effort that spanned a number of local and federal arms, including the V.I. Department of Health, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the U.S. Department of Defense, the V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA), and the university to ramp up efforts to achieve Governor Albert Bryan's proposed benchmark of 50,000 vaccinations by July 1st.

In St. Thomas, William Prendergast, U.S Army Brigadier General and Commander of Task Force 51, said, "We are here in support of the territory and FEMA to provide vaccinations to the community of St. Thomas. We are very proud to be here, we have service members that are members of the community and it's wonderful to come to a community that needs assistance to be able to help a whole government approach of vaccinating Virgin Islanders."

The goal is to get to 234 vaccination shots per day at each vaccination center. Appointments for shots at the centers and other medical providers are made through the VITEMA Hotline at (340) 777-8227 (VACS). If an appointment is assigned to the UVI center, this person will be provided a two-hour window to arrive for the shot. The blocks are 8 a.m -10 a.m, 10 a.m -12 p.m, 1 p.m- 3 p.m., 3 p.m -5 p.m.

The process for vaccination was explained by V.I. National Guard Colonel Sally Petty. He said when a person arrives at the university for a shot, the appointee is greeted by a V.I. National Guard member, who then determines whether this person's name is on the list. The appointee must follow Covid-19 protocols such as mask-wearing.

Thereafter, a temperature check is taken before the appointee is allowed to enter the building. Once inside, the appointee has to fill out a pre-screening checklist from the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention. Once these steps are completed, the appointee will be ready to receive a shot at one of eight vaccination stations.

After the vaccine is administered, the appointee has to be observed for 15-30 minutes for any reactions from the vaccine. Once that step is cleared, the appointment time for the next shot is scheduled before the appointee is escorted out of the facility.

Mr. Prendergast said customer service remains a chief concern of the vaccination centers. "If the patient has questions, [we should] be able to answer the question about the vaccine and to provide good medical support and any information a patient might need as they come through the process," he said. "We are doing 234 vaccines a day, so we really want to make sure we are providing good customer service and making the patient feel comfortable with that process."

Stephen DeBlasio, site manager and VITEMA deputy director of logistics, said, "We are here to meet the needs of everybody, get them in here and out of here as quickly as possible."

Dr. Tai Hunte-Caesar, medical director at the V.I. Department of Health, spoke of challenges that needed to be addressed before the centers could be opened. One challenge was securing the number of vaccine doses needed to keep pace with the governor's goal of 50,000 vaccinations by July, or more immediately, 234 vaccinations per day per district.

"We get an allotment to the territory, so we wanted to make sure we had enough for this site but still have the providers still vaccinating the community," she said. "We worked very closely with the federal program to increase our allotment and thanks to President Biden, which has worked out well, we significantly increased our allotment to the territory."

Dr. Hunte-Caesar also expressed gratitude to the U.S. Dept. of Defense for helping with manpower. "We are extremely happy and thankful for the Department of Defense to come down and help support with the staffing of the vaccination center," she said. The support allowed the Dept. of Health to preserve much-needed Covid-19 resources from elsewhere - including pop-up testing sites — to support the centers.

Mr. DeBlasio, the site manager and VITEMA deputy director of logistics, said a challenge from hwe standpoint was the short time in which the centers had to be operational. "The timing was quick but we made it happen," she said. "It was a joint effort; no single agency can take credit for this but it is all in support of the critical mission of getting vaccination in arms."