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Transformative Talk: COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout

People are overwhelming webpages and phone lines to get a vaccine in the Lehigh Valley, with some flying in from as far as Florida to get a shot, but this region's hospital and health bureau networks put it in a better position than most in the state as the vaccine rollout out accelerates.

That was a message from the region's foremost health and COVID-19 vaccine experts during the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission's first Transformation Talks expert roundtable, hosted by the LVPC on February 13 as part of new series designed to bring together community leaders to tackle the most important and timely issues of the region. The Talks are held online and open to the public.

The full video is available at lvpc.org.

During a 90-minute session that included instruction on how, where and who should get the vaccine, government and community experts offered the people of the Lehigh Valley two pieces of advice: be patient, and continue to be careful, even after getting vaccinated.

"Our hospitals and health bureaus have the capacity to vaccinate right now, when you add in the pharmacy programs, everyone who wants to be vaccinated can be," said Northampton County Executive Lamont McClure. "But we don't have enough vaccine from the state and federal governments, yet."

That will change in the coming weeks and months, as more privately produced vaccines are approved and manufactured, agreed St. Luke's University Health Network Senior Vice President of Medical Affairs and Section Chief of Infectious Diseases Dr. Jeffrey Jahre, and Lehigh Valley Health Network Chairman of the Department of Medicine Infectious Diseases Dr. Timothy J. Friel. While the Pfizer/BionTech and Moderna vaccines have been available since December, a Johnson & Johnson vaccine was added last week and others are in the pipeline. That will put the Lehigh Valley on pace to have most of the Region's willing residents vaccinated, but it's going to require that patience.

"The earliest would be the early summer, whether you want to say that's June or late May, or even early July, I'll let you pick a number," Jahre said. "It will be at least several months, at best."

He added that means people in the 1C phase of the rollout—which includes the essential, government and finance workers employed by most of the Region's 62 municipalities—would be eligible for the vaccine within this timeframe, too.

Jahre, Friel and McClure were joined in the roundtable by Lehigh County Executive Phillips Armstrong, Bethlehem Health Bureau Director Kristen Wenrich, Allentown Health Bureau Director Vicky Kistler and labor attorneys Jacob Sitman and Stephanie Koenig from Fitzpatrick, Lentz and Bubba. LVPC Executive Director Becky Bradley and Matt Assad, Managing Editor, moderated the discussion.

The panelists agreed that having two major hospital networks and fully staffed health bureaus give the Lehigh Valley an advantage over most Pennsylvania counties, many of which have no major hospitals or health bureaus. But that advantage has also been a curse during the early vaccine rollout because this region's ability to provide dedicated phone lines, weblinks and vaccine clinics has attracted attention from well beyond the Region. It has prompted people from across the state, the Northeast and as far as Florida to inundate the Bethlehem and Allentown health bureaus with requests for appointments.

"Allegiant Air is \$29 one-way," Kistler said. "We've had numerous people fly in from Florida, take a vaccine, fly back and then fly back north later for their second shot."

Wenrich said the bureaus have taken steps to redirect out-of-region people back to their home counties, but as publicly funded agencies health bureaus can't turn people away.

Despite its robust network, the Lehigh Valley is having the kind of difficulties seen nationwide in getting the vaccine to frequently underserved populations such as low-income residents, Hispanics and Blacks. For example, in Bethlehem, where 30% of residents identify as Hispanic or Latino, just 5% of early vaccines have gone to people of this origin, Wenrich said. That's going to require not only education, but outreach to gain community trust. That prompted the hospitals, health bureaus and counties to begin working through non-profits like the United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley, Meals on Wheels and the Department on Aging.

"We're working with churches and trusted members of the community to spread the message because we recognize that how we communicate with different segments of the populations is going to be different," Wenrich said. "Education is first and foremost—to dispel the myths and also to help them register for the vaccine."

To do that, the health bureaus and counties have to lead the way, Armstrong said. That includes working to reach underserved communities, working with LANTA and non-profits to set up vaccination sites and get seniors to them.

"We need to be the example. Do as I do. Show people we're wearing our masks, social distancing and washing our hands," Armstrong said. "We need to be the ones setting the example to get everybody else to follow."

Jahre said though it's unclear how long the vaccine will provide protection, it is at least six months. He and Friel also noted that drug companies move incredibly fast at improving and adapting the vaccine to any new variants, enabling the vaccine to remain 100% effective in preventing serious symptoms and hospitalization from COVID-19.

However, the doctors noted that people will still need to wear masks, likely for months, after receiving the vaccine because it has not been proven to be 100% effective in preventing the spread of the virus.

While a measure of normalcy will return, likely by year's end, as more people are vaccinated, COVID-19 will likely not be eliminated from our routine.

"We're not necessarily going to make COVID-19 disappear," Friel said. "But we can transform it from an illness that has been fatal to too many people and families in our community to something that's mild and less likely to put you in the hospital or morgue."

Koenig and Sitman stressed that a vaccination policy is something every workplace should consider—employees do have the right to decline for religious or medical reasons and it would be a bargaining item for a union workforce—and while employers can legally require employees to be vaccinated, it's not right for every workplace. But whether an employer wants to recommend, require or even offer monetary or benefit incentives to vaccinate, a clear, written policy is recommended, they said.

One thing that the COVID-19 vaccine rollout has revealed is that Pennsylvania, like many states, is hampered by an underfunded and fragmented public health system. The state has ten county or municipal health bureaus—and two of them are here. What's needed is more money and a full network of 67 county health bureaus, Kistler said. Kistler is hoping this global crisis will prompt Pennsylvania, or at least some regions, to act.

"If we don't build a public health infrastructure in our communities now," she said, "we never will."