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Valley Senior Living on Columbia residents, staff begin to receive COVID-19 vaccinations

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Written By: Adam Kurtz | Dec 29th 2020 - 1pm.



Valley Senior Living infection preventionists Kayla Porter, second from left, and Carra Hindberg, third from left, receive their COVID-19 vaccinations from Erica Hoffner, left, and Aundrian Bucholz on Tuesday, Dec. 29, at Valley Senior Living. Eric Hylden / Grand Forks Herald

COVID-19 vaccinations for residents and staff at Valley Senior Living on Columbia began early in the morning on Tuesday, Dec. 29, bringing a measure of hope to residents that they might one day soon resume their regular lives.

The vaccinations started at about 7:30 a.m. after Thrifty White Pharmacy, which is partnering with the facility to administer the injections, received the Pfizer vaccine yesterday and began the thawing process. Shortly after 9:30 a.m., a steady stream of staff members entered a room off the lobby to receive the first of the required two doses. Vaccinations for residents and staff at Valley Senior Living's Woodside Village location will begin Wednesday.

"This is extremely exciting for us at Valley," said Garth Rydland, president and CEO of Valley Senior Living. "This is the day we've been waiting for, for months. ... A great gift this holiday season is to be able to give this vaccine to all of our residents."

Rydland told the Herald he was pleased to learn there are enough doses for all residents who have consented to receive the vaccine, and staff as well. The vaccinations will be rolled out in waves of priority starting with skilled nursing facilities, which has been one of the hardest hit populations in the state. As of Tuesday, 768 people in long-term care facilities have died of COVID-19, and the state's death total stands at 1,276. Rydland said he hopes to begin vaccinations for basic care and assisted living residents next week.

Administering the vaccine requires somewhat of a balancing act, and timing is important. Pfizer's vaccine must be stored at subzero temperatures, and a five-day clock starts ticking once that ultra-cold storage ends. Once a vial is open, pharmacists have six hours to give the injections, but each vial only contains five to six doses, which Rydland said makes it easy to ensure none of the vaccine goes unused.

There was a slight air of tension at the site where staff were being vaccinated, not out of fear of the vaccine, but out of an understanding that the doses needed to be administered in a prompt manner.

"Absolutely not," said Carra Hindberg, an infection preventionist, when asked if she felt any apprehension about getting the shot. "Let's get this done; get everybody vaccinated."

People have been "sailing through" the injections, according to Rydland, who added that he received his first shot at 8:30 a.m. He told the Herald he did not feel any ill after-effects. People, he said, can expect to have a sore arm, such as when receiving an influenza vaccine.

Betty Gilpin is a resident at Valley Senior Living, who received her first injection. She said she has not noticed any side effects, and that she has no problem using her arm that got the shot. She's relieved, she told the Herald, to finally have it done and is waiting for her second dose.

"I just held my breath every time (COVID) was in our neighborhood, because I knew that if I ever got it, I wouldn't survive it," Gilpin said.

Unlike staff members who are vaccinated in an assembly-line manner, Thrifty White pharmacists go to each resident's room to give the injections. Gilpin said staff members sat with her for 30 minutes to observe for any side effects, after she had a bad reaction to an influenza shot last year.

For Gilpin, the vaccine means residents are one step closer to socializing again, after nearly three months of staying apart. Different areas of the facility would go on lockdown when a resident

contracted the coronavirus. When the situation was clear, they could meet one another until it happened again.

“I'd like to see some activities that bring some of the residents out of their rooms, because they've been in for so long, I'm afraid they won't come out,” she said.

Rydland said he is waiting on guidance from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, concerning visitation, but that likely won't come until more people outside of the facility have been vaccinated.

“There's a lot of speculation about what that looks like,” he said. “It just wouldn't be fair for me to say at this point, because, to protect a population, it requires many more people being vaccinated than just us.”



Samantha Ketterling, pharmacy manager at Thrifty White, draws a dose of the Pfizer vaccine on Tuesday, Dec. 29, at Valley Senior Living. Eric Hylden / Grand Forks Herald