



**COMMUNITY CARE
NETWORK OF KANSAS**
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Community Health Centers to Increase Vaccinations

For Immediate Release

For more information or to schedule an interview, contact Patrick Lowry, Director of Communications and Governmental Relations, at plowry@communitycareks.org or (785) 806-3932.

TOPEKA – Since their inception in the 1960s, Community Health Centers (CHCs) have been utilized to reduce health disparities and improve health equity. Critical to their long-standing success has been providing care to underserved communities regardless of ability to pay.

So it came as no surprise when the White House declared its intent to ensure populations hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic were receiving vaccines, CHCs were singled out to deliver them. Last week, select health centers began receiving doses directly from the federal government in an initiative that complements steadily expanding state distribution channels.

“Utilizing community health centers to ensure vaccines reach our residents in an equitable manner makes sense,” said Denise Cyzman, CEO of the Community Care Network of Kansas which helps support CHCs in the state. “The commitment to reducing health disparities and improving overall health equity is a core principle of the health center mission.”

The new federal program, which eventually will send vaccines to all 1,300 CHCs around the country, was launched at 25 health centers in seven states. Within a month, 250 health centers in all 50 states will receive direct distribution. The Community Health Center of Southeast Kansas and GraceMed Health Clinic in Wichita have been selected by the U.S. Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA) to pilot the initiative in Kansas.

Kansas Department of Health and Environment Secretary Dr. Lee Norman said that “vaccinating hard-to-reach populations is something the Kansas health centers do very well. They are an excellent choice for the direct vaccine shipments from the Biden administration.”

Community Care Chief Strategy Officer Alice Weingartner said Kansas health centers have been vaccinating people since the first shipment of doses from KDHE arrived in mid-December for healthcare workers. Many CHCs continue working with local health departments to immunize Phase 2 Kansans, and in some cases have been tapped to lead the coordination of vaccination efforts in their communities. “It is critical to have a multi-pronged approach,” she said.

Moderna vaccines that arrived at the CHC of SEK immediately went into the arms of staff members and other healthcare workers in the region. Subsequent doses allocated to them by local health departments were administered according to state guidelines. The CHC of SEK has given more than 5,000 vaccinations, working primarily in school systems.

“Everything has been done in cooperation with county health departments thus far,” said Community Relations Director Robert Poole, adding that staff are “very anxious to begin doing this directly.”

Since the health center is unsure how many doses will be provided by the federal government, Poole said they have various scenarios ready to go.

“We’re prepared to do whatever it takes to get shots into arms,” he said. “There is no shortage of arms out there willing to be vaccinated.”

President/CEO Krista Postei expounded: “Based on the calls we’ve been getting, we know many people are eager to get vaccinated and so afraid they’ll be overlooked because they live in rural Kansas. It is so wonderful to tell them they’ve actually been prioritized nationally.”

Located in Wichita, Clearwater, McPherson and Topeka, GraceMed has a very diverse population base.

“We are very eager to receive the Moderna doses, allowing us to be a helpmate in vaccinating our communities’ most vulnerable population,” said Venus Lee, GraceMed’s CEO.

Lee said the health center has established relations with many of the city’s residents without homes, a sizable number of racial and ethnic minorities, and currently has more than 8,500 patients 65 and older.

“It is imperative that *all* individuals in Phase 2 and beyond receive vaccinations,” Lee said. “I am excited the federal government has reaffirmed its commitment to an equitable solution to this public health emergency.”

As GraceMed and CHC of SEK finalize the logistics of their plans to deliver vaccines to individuals the White House has deemed a high priority, the other 18 Community Care health centers in Kansas that

soon will become part of the initiative are getting prepared as well. The timeframe might be uncertain – as are the number of doses to expect, but each community health center is ready to accept the added responsibility. They, after all, have been serving the state’s underserved for decades.

“Community Health Centers are an important part of the overall healthcare infrastructure in Kansas,” said Matthew Schmidt, CEO of Health Ministries Clinic in Newton and president of the Community Care Network of Kansas. “It only makes sense to maximize this network and its resources during a time like this.”

Elsewhere in the Wichita area, HealthCore Clinic has a laser focus on racial and ethnic minority groups as they comprise more than 60 percent of its patient population.

“HealthCore Clinic provides a culturally responsive level of care for its community,” said President and CEO Teresa Lovelady.

Lovelady said the health center has served Wichita’s most vulnerable populations before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and will continue to serve long after. As the coronavirus laid bare disparate health outcomes among minority populations, HealthCore has worked non-stop to help correct them.

During a three-week period in May 2020, staff administered more than 1,700 tests utilizing a mobile clinic set up at the Wichita State University metroplex. HealthCore also opened a respiratory clinic and helped spearhead a safety-net system with other CHCs to provide sick patients a safe environment in which to receive treatment at the height of the lockdown.

Currently, HealthCore is in the middle of a multi-day vaccination clinic for vulnerable patients who meet the state’s Phase 2 criteria. They are holding the event in a community gymnasium so they can see a high volume of participants in a safe, socially distanced atmosphere.

Health Partnership Clinic in Johnson County has had multiple vaccine clinics, including one targeting patients 65 and older and/or essential workers in the food service industry during its most recent. HPC staff has been part of more than 1,300 vaccinations either in-clinic or by working with local health departments and other providers.

“Our partners have been very appreciative of our responsiveness to provide COVID vaccines to their healthcare workers,” said CEO Amy Falk.

HPC staff already is working diligently to identify patients who will qualify for the shipments from the federal government, Falk said. Additionally, “a great deal of education has been taking place to reduce vaccine hesitancy so that patients are willing to get the vaccinations once we have them.”

In Hays, vaccination efforts are working “pretty good,” said Bryan Brady, CEO of the First Care Clinic.

Brady said more than 2,100 doses have been administered through a collaborative effort with First Care, the Ellis County Health Department and the Hays Medical Center. The three providers use unoccupied retail space at the local mall and vaccinate until they run out of doses.

“I am looking forward to an increased supply,” Brady said. “The 400 doses received by the health department are all gone by Wednesday each week. At this rate, it would take over a year to vaccinate everyone in the county.”

Further west, the Hoxie Medical Clinic worked with the Sheridan County Health Department to conduct drive-through testing until it got too cold, then moved the operation indoors where sick and well patients are kept separated.

Clinic Manager Kevin Johnson said the willingness of our community to get vaccinated has been surprising. Staff identified high-risk individuals with a goal of not wasting a single dose. Cold-calling patients contained in the health center’s electronic health records brought them in contact with people grateful for the opportunity to receive the vaccine. Some cried they were so happy.

Johnson explained the elation like this: “As healthcare providers, we have asked a lot of our community over the past year – keep social distance, wear masks, skip holiday travel, etc. Now we are finally able to give them some hope that things will get better!”

KDHE’s Norman echoed the sentiment.

“As their name suggests, the Community Care Network of Kansas *knows* their communities and how to reach people who need help, including COVID-19 vaccinations,” Norman said.

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Statewide, the combined efforts of CHCs, local health departments, hospitals and pharmacies has

resulted in 340,000 Kansans receiving at least one dose. More than 144,000 have completed the two-shot regimen as of Monday.

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About Community Care Clinic of Kansas: Community Care exists to achieve equitable access to high-quality, whole-person care for all Kansans, regardless of ability to pay. As the Primary Care Association (PCA) for Kansas, Community Care supports and strengthens its members through advocacy, education and communication. Community Care’s diverse membership includes Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), and Look-Alikes (LALs), as well as public and private nonprofit Community-Based Primary Care Clinics (CBPCCs) and Rural Health Clinics (RHCs).