

Community Weekly

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At A Crossroads

By Cynthia Morrow, MD, MPH

As we have reached a crossroads in our fight against COVID-19 with vaccination rates continuing to go up and case counts continuing to go down, it seems like a good opportunity to take stock of where we are as a community.

Since the first vaccines were given in late December, we and our vaccine partners, including pharmacies, New Horizons, and Bradley Free Clinic, have administered over 225,000 doses of vaccine. It is encouraging that so many people have taken the opportunity to protect themselves and our community. Over the past several months, the Roanoke City and Alleghany Health Districts have worked with Carilion Clinic, the Medical Reserve Corps, the Virginia National Guard, and local nursing programs to create large, efficient, convenient vaccination events in Covington, New Castle, Roanoke, and Salem. While at one point we were vaccinating 4000-5000 people per day in these large clinics, our strategy has switched to small neighborhood vaccine events across our districts in which we now serve 50-200 people per day.

We recognize that there are many different reasons for why some people have not yet been vaccinated. It is important to us that we provide the community with as many opportunities to be vaccinated as possible, in as many settings as possible to try to reduce barriers for people to get vaccinated. For example, we recently held a vaccination clinic on a Saturday afternoon at the Local Colors festival, on a Tuesday evening at the Vinton War Memorial, and on a Wednesday morning at the Food King in New Castle. We have coordinated an event with the Blue Ridge Independent Living Center to try to make it more convenient for people navigating physical challenges to access the vaccine. We have also coordinated an event with the Mexican Consulate to have translators on site to make it more convenient for people for whom language may be a barrier. We look forward to clinics in the future at varied places such as the Salem Fair and every three weeks at the Salvation Army and at Pilgrim Baptist in Roanoke. When it is feasible, we hope to provide choice of vaccine at these sites. If you have suggestions for places that might be a good place for us to have a vaccination team present, please email them to us at rcahdccovidresponse@vdh.virginia.gov. We also encourage people check with their local retail pharmacy or doctor's office- many of which now provide vaccine.

As more and more people are getting vaccinated and as case counts continue to drop across Virginia, it is great news that we are able to relax some of the rules, such as no longer requiring masks for fully vaccinated individuals. It is important to remember, however, that even though we are down from the 1,500 cases per week we saw at the peak of disease activity, we still are seeing 100 cases of COVID-19 reported every week. We have much to celebrate as we move into the summer, let us celebrate by using common sense and by encouraging those we love to get vaccinated if they have not yet done so.