

“Day of Hope” as vaccines arrive in Massachusetts long-term care

By Katie Lannan

State House News Service

Retired teacher Shirley Nolan raised her arms aloft after receiving her first COVID-19 vaccine, exclaiming, “Hallelujah.”

Nolan was the first resident of Boston’s Edgar P. Benjamin Healthcare Center to get the shot, a moment captured on video and publicized by state health officials as efforts began Monday to vaccinate long-term care residents in Massachusetts.

The coronavirus has exacted a tragic toll on long-term care centers both in the state and nationally and the risks faced by their residents and workforce have placed the facilities near the front vaccine rollout line.

In Massachusetts, where long-term care fatalities account for 60 percent of the 12,110 COVID-19 deaths logged so far, the Baker administration’s vaccine distribution timeline puts long-term care, rest homes and assisted living facilities in the first phase, as the second demographic eligible for the shots after health care workers involved in pandemic response.

Through a partnership with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CVS and Walgreens are administering vaccines to nursing home and assisted living residents, with the pharmacies handling scheduling and coordination of on-site clinics, supply ordering, data reporting and cold chain management of the vaccines.

Officials at the state’s COVID-19 command center said this

month that they expected between 40,000 and 60,000 doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine to be shipped to CVS and Walgreens for skilled nursing facilities in Massachusetts.

Separately, the VA Bedford Healthcare System began vaccinating its long-term care residents on Dec. 14, when 96-year-old World War II veteran Margaret Klessens became the first VA patient in the country to receive the vaccine.

Monday marked “a day of hope” at The Ellis Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Norwood, where a team from CVS arrived at 11 a.m. and started vaccinating staff, with plans to begin working with residents after lunch, administrator Anthony Franchi said.

Another vaccine clinic at The Ellis is planned for Tuesday, and Franchi told the News Service Monday afternoon that “things are going very well” so far.

“I think there was some trepidation before today, but there’s definitely excitement,” he said. “There’s hope, I think that’s the best way to describe it. More people are signing up today than we had figured.”

Franchi said managing through the pandemic has required a day-at-a-time approach, and he’s been unable “to look into the future too much,” crediting staff with working together to do their best for the residents.

“I think there’s hope in the air with 2021 right around the corner,” Franchi said, describing the mood in the facility as “encouraged.”

As of last Tuesday, before the long-term care vaccination campaign began, 35,618 people in Massachusetts had received their first of the two vaccine doses, according to the Department of Public Health.

In a recent MassINC Polling Group survey of 1,180

Massachusetts residents, 36 percent said they would like to take a COVID-19 vaccine as soon as it's possible for them to do so, with 47 percent saying they wanted to wait until either a few people they know or many other people get the shot first. When the results are broken down by age, 45 percent of people age 60 and over said they wanted the vaccine as soon as possible.

The Massachusetts Senior Care Association, which represents more than 350 nursing and long-term care facilities, earlier this month launched a vaccine-promotion campaign aimed at providing residents and workers with information on safety and efficacy of the vaccines so that they will feel comfortable taking them.

Association President Tara Gregorio said Monday that many nursing homes are reporting that more than 90 percent of their residents have consented to COVID-19 vaccination and that "a growing number of staff are planning to be vaccinated." The organization plans to monitor vaccine rollout "to ensure that the safety and well-being of our residents and their caregivers are appropriately prioritized," she said.

"Today marks a critical and hopeful milestone in our fight against Covid-19 with the first wave of vaccines being distributed today in nursing facilities across the Commonwealth," Gregorio said in a statement to the News Service.

As of Sunday, 414 long-term care facilities in Massachusetts had reported at least one probable or confirmed case of COVID-19 since the pandemic first took hold here, with a total of 7,247 COVID-19 deaths reported in long-term care facilities, according to DPH data. More than 30,000 long-term care residents and workers have been diagnosed with probable or confirmed cases of COVID-19.

State public health officials identified 131 new clusters of

two or more COVID-19 cases in long-term care facilities between Nov. 22 and Dec. 19, and another 195 previously identified clusters were still considered ongoing, the DPH reported last Thursday.