

Groups Work to Get Shots Into Arms on St. John

By Amy H. Roberts - February 8, 2021



Vaccines will be given out at the Upper Campus at the Giff Hill School this Saturday. (Photo by Amy H. Roberts)

Frustrated by the limited availability of COVID-19 vaccines on St. John, a group of community members started meeting in January to make more vaccines more readily available.

They now plan to distribute an additional 200 vaccines every two weeks starting this weekend.

On Saturday, Feb. 13, residents who meet the CDC criteria will be able to get the Moderna vaccine at a special clinic held beginning at 1 p.m. at the Giff Hill School's Upper Campus, under the auspices of the V.I. Department of Health.

Priority is being given to people 65 and older and those with high-risk medical conditions. Certain front-line essential workers may also be vaccinated.

Those interested in being on the list to receive a vaccine for the COVID-19 virus can [preregister online](#) and make sure the forms are submitted to RedHookFamilyPractice.com. Further information is available by calling 340-423-8107 or sending an email to vaccinestj@gmail.com.

The medical director for Saturday's event is Dr. Siri Akal of Red Hook Family Practice. She and four members of her staff will be joined by a cadre of volunteers who will direct patients as soon as they arrive at the parking lot at the Giff Hill School.

After being screened, patients will fill out the necessary paperwork if they haven't preregistered, proceed to a classroom to receive their shot and then move to an area where they will be monitored for up to 30 minutes. The waiting time is designed to make sure medical services are immediately available in the rare event that a patient experiences a severe allergic reaction to the shot.

Red Hook Family Practice has sought to provide vaccines to residents of St. John, but up until now hasn't been able to find a suitable site. Though the practice has an office at The Marketplace on St. John, it's far too small to meet guidelines for social distancing and supervision required by the CDC.

Patients from St. John have had to travel to Red Hook on St. Thomas. For the past month, the medical practice has administered almost 700 vaccines at the gym at Ivanna Eudora Kean High School.

Monique Rodriguez-Poleon has served as the patient care coordinator for Red Hook Family Practice and Dr. Robin Ellett has served as the medical supervisor at the Kean gym. Maggie Day, the practice's manager, gives them credit for their continued hard work.

Medical staff from Red Hook Family Practice sets up to give COVID-19 vaccines at the Kean High School gym. (Photo provided by Maggie Day)

Day also praised the community group of volunteers that is organizing the event at the Giffit Hill School.

"Holy Mackerel! Their commitment and organizational capacity is amazing," she said.

The nucleus of the St. John group includes three board members of the Island Green Living Association – David DiGiacomo, Harith Wickrema and Akhil Deshwal – who have been working together for years on long-term projects to benefit the island.

They joined forces with members of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of St. John who had been in contact with St. John church leaders, including the Rev. Anthony Abraham of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Church, to find a suitable site to distribute the vaccines.

Churchgoers who attended services in person last Sunday were encouraged by their pastors to sign up for a vaccine this Saturday.

"This group has given us the outreach that we didn't have the capacity to do," Day said.

If all goes as planned, Red Hook Family Practice will continue to provide vaccination services every two weeks, the organizers said. Those receiving the first dose of the vaccine will need to return in four weeks to receive their second dose.

On Saturday morning, 100 of Red Hook Family Practice's patients from St. John will receive their vaccines at the Giffth Hill School. Some have been on the waiting list for weeks but have not been able to travel to St. Thomas, said Day. She said the Giffth Hill School has a ramp for wheelchair access and the air-conditioned facility can accommodate the flow of patients comfortably. Transportation for those who don't have cars will be provided by volunteers.

The vaccines are free, but insurance companies will be billed for those patients who have insurance.

"There are significant costs – staffing, supplies and the enormous amount of data that has to be entered," Day said. "We'd do it anyway. Dr. Akal considers it a community obligation."

Island Health and Wellness Center

Until this week, Island Health and Wellness Center has been the only place to get a **COVID-19 vaccine on St. John.**

Sandy Colasacco, family nurse practitioner and executive director of the clinic, began giving out the vaccine on Dec. 11. Within four weeks, her staff of four had administered 227 shots of the Pfizer vaccine in the evenings when she was done seeing her regular patients.

Now she's dedicating Tuesdays and Thursdays to giving out the vaccines. In the past three weeks she's more than doubled the earlier number, giving out 601 first doses and 175 second doses.

"Sandy's been working very hard; she deserves much appreciation," said Wickrema, one of the STJ community vaccination group's organizers. "Her protocol has been excellent."

Colasacco is now stepping up the pace. "Last week, we changed our system and vaccinated 328 people," she said. "We have teamed up with Chelsea Drug Store to help us vaccinate more people. People pick up the paperwork from Chelsea Drug Store on St. John, and then Chelsea enters it into the database prior to the appointments."

Initially, her medical practice had only one login to the national database, which slowed her capacity to document her vaccine distribution. Recently, she was able to get more logins to the database and enlist the help of Heidi and Tim Coyle, the owners of Chelsea Drug Store. Colasacco said she already works with Chelsea Drug Store to fill prescriptions.

"They are bound by HIPAA [patient privacy] laws. They are also picking up the vaccines for us on Mondays. They have been an incredible asset to us, and we wouldn't be able to come close to doing this many vaccines without them," Colasacco said.

"We will do another 300 to 350 – depending on how many doses we get in the vial – next week, and every week moving forward, as long as we have supply and demand," she said.

Colasacco has reached out to hundreds of people who were on her waiting list.

“We’ve vaccinated or scheduled almost all of our 65 and older residents on our list; we have also started vaccinating hotel employees and restaurant workers per guidelines issued by the Department of Health.”

Vaccination group plans to expand

“In order to open up [the island for business] 100 percent and to protect the most vulnerable in our community, we need every taxi driver, every police officer, every grocery store worker to be vaccinated as fast as possible to build up herd immunity,” said Wickrema.

Working with other community leaders, Wickrema has reached out to the Bryan administration and Health officials to help secure sites for even more massive vaccination efforts.

Wickrema said they have approached the Westin Resort on St. John, hoping to secure Lemongrass Restaurant, the resort’s largest restaurant, which has not reopened since Hurricane Irma hit and the Westin converted from a hotel to a time-share structure.

“The Lemongrass Restaurant would be the perfect place,” Wickrema said. “It’s open air. There’s a generator. There’s a back entrance with a parking lot,” Wickrema said.

The resort’s local management is now working out the details with corporate management, and if all goes well, mass vaccinations may begin in March, he said.
