VA’s vaccine rollout

World War II veteran Margaret Klessens, 96, was the first VA patient nationwide to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, at VA Bedford Healthcare System, Mass. (WWMT/Department of Veteran Affairs)

Department of Veterans Affairs begins COVID-19 vaccine distribution to high-risk populations, with more on the horizon

More than 160 VA medical facilities were the first to receive and administer the initial rounds of COVID-19 vaccines in December, with priority going to frontline health care workers along with veterans residing in long-term care and spinal cord injury centers.

“Ultimately, the department’s goal is to offer the vaccine to all veterans receiving care at VA,” noted a VA statement announcing the distribution plan. “As increased vaccine supply is obtained, VA plans to distribute these vaccines at additional facilities to provide the vaccine to more veterans and employees.”

Shortly after the U.S. Food and Drug Administration gave its
authorization, the VA received 73,000 Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine doses, with another 53,000 arriving in the weeks that followed. The initial group of 37 VA medical centers to receive the vaccines quickly expanded to 128 additional sites, as the VA received 150,000 doses of Moderna’s COVID-19 vaccine, following its FDA approval.

Pfizer’s COVID-19 vaccine, which the FDA assessed to be 95% effective in preventing the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, is administered in two doses, three weeks apart, officials said.

Following the preliminary rollout, the VA will begin to offer vaccines to more veterans at risk of contracting the virus, developing severe illness and dying from COVID-19, based on guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Under those guidelines, the factors determining high-risk populations include advanced age, existing health problems that make COVID-19 more severe—such as diabetes, heart disease or obesity—and other risks.

Veterans seeking vaccination may face initial delays due to a limited initial supply. However, the VA expects vaccine production and distribution to increase substantially in 2021 as other pharmaceutical companies receive FDA approval for their COVID-19 vaccines.

“As many more millions of doses become available [in 2021], I know we’ll be continuing that operation to widen the lens for veterans,” said Dr. Jane Kim, the VA’s chief consultant for preventive medicine. “As we get more vaccines, we’ll be able to vaccinate those who are at higher risk first and continue going on from there.”

Learn more
For additional information, veterans and family members should review the VA’s coronavirus FAQ, va.gov/coronavirus-veteran-frequently-asked-questions.