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NEWS

COVID vaccine: FSU Tucker Center to help reduce wait, will provide 300 shots daily

"It's a super experience. It's fantastic," one patient said.

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Elizabeth Lieser sat in a comfortable chair inside the cavernous Exhibition Hall at the Tucker Center Wednesday morning, minutes after getting her first dose of the Pfizer COVID vaccine.

She and her husband James had 9 a.m. appointments and arrived 30 minutes early, as instructed.

"Everybody here knows what they are doing and not second-guessing," she said. "It's very professional. It makes me feel good. Now, I just have to come back for my second shot. I commend Gov. DeSantis for getting it all taken care of."

Her husband, sitting nearby, agreed the operation was without any complications. By 9:10 a.m., the two had filled out paperwork, gotten their shots and were now waiting to conclude the 15-minute observation period.

"The flow was straightforward and easy to follow," he said. "It's a super experience. It's fantastic. Florida State is a great community partner."

The Liesers were among the 300 people with appointments to get vaccines Wednesday at what is formally called the The Donald L. Tucker Civic Center at Florida State University.

On Tuesday, Florida State University in partnership with the Leon County Department of Health began offering the Tucker Center to provide vaccines to those 65 and older who had previously registered and were on a waiting list to get their first shots.

Patients were in line by 8 a.m. and by mid-morning, the hall was bustling with people swiftly moving from the waiting line to check-in to getting the vaccine and then into the waiting area

to be checked for reactions.

Vaccines are given 8 a.m. to noon with a limit of 300 per day. At noon, the hall undergoes a complete sanitation and at 1 p.m., COVID testing for FSU employee and students resumes.

The vaccine distribution is not wide open, however. Those on Leon County Health Department's waiting list were sent a link advising them of the Tucker Center availability, depending on the amount of vaccines on hand.

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Once at FSU, they complete a registration, go through a screening process to make sure they are eligible and then get in line to get the vaccine. Each dose is brought to one of the eight stations set up.

“We don't want to waste any vaccine. Once the vial is punctured, you have 30 minutes to use the vaccine in that vial,” said James Zedaker, director of the Physician Assistant program at FSU's College of Medicine and director of university projects for health and emergency operations.

FSU received about 1,170 doses of the vaccine.

Held under tight security, the vaccine is stored at the Translational Science Laboratory at the College of Medicine. Even before COVID, the laboratory housed the required ultra-cold storage freezers that can maintain the vaccine at negative 80 degrees Celsius, or minus 112 Fahrenheit.

“They are kept frozen until they are needed, so we only pull the amount of vaccine that we know we are going to use for a particular day,” Zedaker said. “We store it in a vaccine refrigerator overnight so it can thaw and it is transported here to be administered.”

Each individual shot given at the Tucker Center is registered upon use and recorded with Florida Shots, a statewide database that tracks vaccine availability.

“It's a very meticulous accounting system for the vaccine,” Zedaker said. “The goal is we have to use all of the vaccine.”

Zedaker said FSU's vaccine project is run by the College of Medicine and University Health Services, who are co-equal partners.

In addition, professors and students from the College of Nursing play critical roles. There also are physicians, physician assistants, emergency medical technicians, paramedics and Florida Department of Emergency Management staff on hand.

"I think COVID is actually not only an FSU problem, it's a global problem and I think with the role FSU plays in the community, it makes sense that if we have the infrastructure and support that we make it available to the folks in the community," Zedaker said.

Zedaker said the university is expecting to expand the operation to 8 a.m.-5 p.m. in the next couple of weeks. That will depend on the amount of vaccine available.

In doing so, daily COVID testing for FSU students, faculty and staff will move upstairs to the concourse level at the Tucker Center.

Ryen Pagel, associate director for clinical operations at University Health Services, arrived at the Tucker Center around 8 a.m. and was non-stop, overseeing every part of the operation.

Pagel also played a critical role in establishing on-campus vaccines on campus last month.

"I think it's an incredible opportunity of partnership with the community," Pagel said. "This is a pandemic that affects everyone across the world, and it is and incredibly unique vaccine campaign that really is going to take partnerships like these to reach our community."

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