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FEATURED

The College of the Florida mass vaccination site will be operational this weekend

First shots set for Sunday; college works off DOH list

By Timothy O'Hara Key West Citizen

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The College of the Florida Keys student nurse Teresa Rodriguez gives fellow student nurse William Thompson a COVID-19 vaccine at the Florida Department of Health in Monroe County. Both are among the CFK nursing students and staff assisting with vaccinations in the Keys.

Photo by Amber Ernst-Leonard/The College of the Florida Keys



The College of the Florida Keys has partnered with Florida Department of Health in Monroe County for the college in Key West to be a mass COVID-19 vaccination site, with shots being administered there on Sunday.

The 400 vaccinations on Sunday are by appointment only, and the college is working off the Health Department's application list. The college will be calling people to confirm they are on the list, according to CFK spokeswoman Amber Ernst-Leonard. Doctors and medical staff and people older than 65 are the only ones receiving the vaccine at this time.

The vaccinations will be done by 38 nursing students and seven college employees, according to Ernst-Leonard.

Bob Eadie, who oversees the Monroe County offices of the state Department of Health, said his offices expects to receive 300 more doses of the vaccine this week.

The college recently entered into an agreement with the Department of Health in Monroe County to become an official vaccination site, according to Ernst-Leonard. As the vaccine becomes available, CFK will provide ultracold vaccine storage and designated areas on the Key West campus with sufficient space for the public to safely distance to complete paperwork, receive the vaccine and wait 15 minutes following their vaccination, which is a best practice to ensure safety, Ernst-Leonard said.

Nursing students — under the direction of CFK Dean of Sciences and Nursing Mark Roby and CFK Director of Nursing and Health Sciences Dr. Carla Fry — will administer the vaccines, according to Ernst-Leonard.



With an army of more than 200 students enrolled in the associate's degree and bachelor's degree nursing programs — the largest enrollment in CFK history — the college is uniquely poised to help in the vaccination effort, according to college officials.

CFK President Dr. Jonathan Gueverra connected with the Medical Center at Ocean Reef during the December holiday break, while Fry connected with the Department of Health to arrange for student nurses to administer the first doses of vaccine. The Ocean Reef medical center was set up to administer 100 shots an hour.

“Through participation with Ocean Reef and DOH-Monroe, we have honed the vaccine process to keep operations running smoothly,” Fry said. “The college is now capable of operating on our own and/or continuing to help our community partners. We stand ready to respond however future vaccine distribution should flow.”

“CFK nursing students were so eager to help with this historic vaccine endeavor, many of them returned on a moment's notice to assist before their winter break ended,” Fry noted.

Alongside Dr. Fry and Dean Roby, nurses from the Health Department and the staff at the Ocean Reef Medical Center, CFK nursing students have administered more than 4,000 vaccines, which represents approximately 85% of the vaccines administered in the county.

The college is eager to build upon the success of these first rounds, elected and organizational leaders have aligned resources, expertise and services to ready the Keys for larger-scale vaccination endeavors, college representatives said. Specific plans include transporting and storing the vaccine, scheduling and staffing vaccination sites and administering doses to the public, according to Ernst-Leonard.

CFK has initiated collaboration among multiple organizations in Monroe County to prepare for a future rollout.



Positioning the college as a fighting force against the pandemic in the Keys has been a top priority for Gueverra, college officials said. He initially arranged for the college to receive vaccine from Baptist Health, a major partner of CFK, but that plan ended when the state's distribution model changed.

Many more partners have committed support. The City of Key West will contribute volunteers, first responders who have been trained to administer the vaccine, an ambulance on location should there be a need for one, as well as law enforcement support at CFK's Key West campus. Lower Keys Medical Center will provide support in the way of needle disposal service, supplies and volunteers.

In the Middle and Upper Keys, the Monroe County School District is making space in two of its schools for vaccination sites. Monroe County Sheriff Rick Ramsay has committed to law enforcement support for traffic and crowd control at those locations.

"I am thankful to see how supportive each and every one of our partners have been and continue to be in the face of this crisis. The number of healthcare providers who have committed to supporting this endeavor continues to grow. We could not beat this virus without their continued assistance," Eadie said.

In the county's northernmost community, the Medical Center at Ocean Reef continues to host CFK, DOH, Community Health of South Florida and Curative to demonstrate their vaccination protocols and to help them adapt their processes for larger vaccination events, according to Ernst-Leonard.

Additionally, the Ocean Reef Community Foundation's COVID-19 Relief Fund, which has contributed almost \$800,000 to local nonprofit organizations assisting Monroe County residents to date, is now focusing on facilitating, accelerating and increasing access to COVID-19 vaccine. ORCF has committed to funding supplies, staff, logistical and other needs to support the collaborative vaccination effort throughout the county, according to Ernst-Leonard.



“It is amazing public-private partnerships such as this, that make Monroe County an incredibly resilient community,” Monroe County Emergency Management Director Shannon Weiner said. “In this county, we consistently accomplish great things by leveraging resources and partnering together.”

As soon as vaccine becomes available in the Keys, eligible Florida residents will be able to sign up for an appointment through an online scheduling system. When available, information about vaccination locations, times and scheduling will be shared broadly across multiple media platforms, Ernst-Leonard said.

Lower Keys Medical Center has received its 300 second shot doses and those employees have been scheduled and all 300 employees will have had both doses by Feb. 16, hospital spokeswoman Lynn Corbett-Winn said.

“We also currently have a request for an additional allotment for staff and medical staff but have not been able to acquire more at this time,” Corbett-Winn said.

Local and national health experts remind the public to continue to vigilantly follow COVID-19 safety protocols, including proper mask wearing, social distancing, and hand washing at this time.

As of Tuesday, there have been 5,393 confirmed COVID-19 cases among Keys residents, according to the Department of Health. The local Health Department confirmed 21 new cases as Tuesday in Monroe County, including six more in Key West, eight more in Key Largo, two more in Marathon, three more in Tavernier and one more in each Islamorada and Summerland Key.

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