

To our Kearny County Community:

Last week was a very exciting week at Kearny County Hospital for us as an organization and for our community, as we were able to begin administering the COVID-19 vaccine to our staff! We were able to vaccinate more than 50 employees, and hope to receive more vaccine in the coming weeks. The volume of immunizations that we receive over the next weeks and months is likely to be unpredictable, and we do not yet know when we will have vaccine available to distribute to the higher risk individuals in our community. However, our goal will be to administer the vaccine once available as quickly as possible, and we will make the information we have in regards to the timing of this availability as soon as we have that information. I have had many questions about the vaccine, and wanted answer a few of the most common questions that I get with our community as a whole.

As of this week, both the Pfizer vaccine and Moderna vaccine have received Emergency Use Authorization (EUA). This means the FDA has approved them for widespread distribution but is still gathering data, with anticipated full approval in the next few months. This does not mean that the vaccine is not safe. The few COVID-19 treatments that we are using in both inpatient and outpatient settings, like remdesivir and bamlanivimab, have also come to us after being given EUA by the FDA. As COVID-19 is still less than a year old, full FDA approval without a period of EUA is not really possible.

The COVID-19 vaccine is a great vaccine, and I strongly recommend that individuals receive the vaccine when they qualify to receive it. It is 94-95% effective in preventing lab-confirmed COVID-19 infection in individuals. The incidence of severe COVID-19 infection in those that have been vaccinated is even lower, it essentially is "0"! This efficacy percentage is incredibly high, approaching the efficacy of the polio vaccine which helped to eradicate polio globally. These numbers are what makes this a very good vaccine, and its efficacy is substantially higher than widely used and recommended immunizations like influenza. Adverse reactions are very low, and most common effects include soreness at the site of injection, and sometimes myalgias (general "achy" feeling) and fevers that can last for 1-2 days. None of these are concerning. It is not made from live virus, so you cannot "catch COVID" from the vaccine. It's mechanism of action is to basically "teach" the body to make antibodies to COVID-19 without being exposed to the actual virus. To put it clearly, this virus is very effective and very safe.

There are 2 reasons that I am encouraging our community to receive the vaccine when it is available to be administered:

1. Protection of you: This vaccine is the most safe and effective tool that we have to protect you as an individual from COVID-19. Most people who are infected with COVID-19 recover within 10 days without incident. However, as we at KCH have seen up close, some individuals become very ill. It has been difficult to predict who will become severely ill with COVID-19, and treatment options for severe illness are still limited. Masks, hand washing, and social distancing have been good intermediate measures which have helped to slow the spread of COVID-19, but the vaccine gives us a better tool to protect individuals from COVID-19 infection.
2. Elimination of the virus: This vaccine allows us to move from mitigation ("slow the spread") of the virus to elimination. I cannot stress the importance of this enough: the vaccine is our "way back to normal." As we eliminate the virus from our community and from our region, we can begin to gather in larger groups again, move away from masks, etc. However, elimination of the


virus depends on the percentage of people receiving the vaccine. In other words, the more people that we are able to vaccinate, the quicker we move towards this return to normal.

I realize that there is a lot of information and a lot of opinions available on these vaccines.

Social media in particular is full of thoughts and opinions on COVID-19 and the vaccine. I encourage you to be careful with what each of you read and believe about this vaccine, and to use the available evidence and data to make informed decisions.

2020 has been a long and difficult year. Again, no one has been unaffected by this pandemic. However, as you may have already seen, we were able to move our Kearny County COVID-19 Public Risk Level to level 3 this week. We continue to see a downward trend in new cases right now, which is very encouraging. The availability of the vaccine right now to our long-term care residents and to our staff at KCH had “injected” excitement and encouragement into our staff. Throughout the holiday season, please continue with our current strategies that are in place - the 3 W’s: “Wash your hands, wear a mask, watch your distance.” Please continue to limit large gatherings. We can be encouraged, though, that we are beginning to see glimmers of hope and progress against COVID-19 as 2020 draws to a close. Thank you for showing respect and preference to your family, friends, and neighbors.

Have a Blessed Christmas and a Happy New Year.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Drew Miller', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Drew Miller, MD, FAAFP
Kearny County Health Officer