

Governor Phil Murphy

Press Pool Coverage: First Lady Tammy Murphy Visits Atlantic City Vaccine Mega-Site

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ATLANTIC CITY — A long, snaking path is mapped out on the floor of the exhibit hall at the Atlantic City Convention Center, ready to guide more than 2,000 people a day as they arrive to get their COVID-19 vaccines.

On Tuesday morning, just a few days after the center began operating, there was no need for crowd control. A small number of people waited for their shots, and to meet New Jersey First Lady Tammy Murphy as she toured the facility.

Vaccine availability is key, Murphy said.

"We need supply," Murphy said of more vaccine. "But we were not going to wait to get (more) vaccine to figure out the infrastructure," Murphy said. Instead the mega centers are set up and will be there when the supply becomes more available.

The city's convention center, the sixth such large-scale vaccine center to open statewide, is being run by AtlantiCare Regional Medical Center and Atlantic County government, with the help of the state and New Jersey National Guard troops from bases in Atlantic City and Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst. It is giving out the Pfizer vaccine.

The Meadowlands site closed for a day Tuesday due to lack of vaccine, officials said.

"I had no hesitation at all," said Sylvia Alston, 66, of Egg Harbor Township, about getting a vaccine. "I'm ready to go."

Murphy talked to four older women as they sat at tables separated by more than 6 feet and answered questions for nurses who administered the shots. They had to disclose any fevers, illnesses and — to their great amusement — current pregnancies or breastfeeding.

"Let's rock and roll," said Mirian Ramos, 65, of Pleasantville, as nurse Eileen Xu approached with the syringe. Applause followed.

Sherrie Bragg, AtlantiCare Regional Medical Center's clinical facilities manager, said the center is now administering 480 vaccines a day. It will ramp up over the next few weeks to its peak any as 2,400 shots a day, she estimated — as more vaccine becomes available.

The convention center last hosted a convention in March 12, 2020, said Casino Reinvestment Development Authority Executive Director Matt Doherty. That was a meeting of the Tri-State Camp group, which brings together summer camp operators.

In the early stages of the pandemic, the Convention Center had been set up as a field hospital, mirroring those set up at the Meadowlands Exposition Center in Secaucus and the New Jersey Convention and Exposition Center in Edison.

The pop-up site was operational for a few months and was set up primarily for non-COVID-19 patients to help alleviate pressure on local hospitals. The site was under the operation of the Federal Emergency Management Agency in partnership with the State Police, state health officials and the region's Level 1 trauma center, Cooper University Hospital. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers selected the site and was responsible for the construction.

Hosting the vaccine center will bring in a little income, but nothing like the center would normally generate, Doherty said.

If it weren't for the pandemic, a pool and spa show would be happening at the center right now, Doherty said, bringing thousands of people to town for days.

"It's better for us to have something here," Doherty said. "But we are not making money. It will help with expenses," such as heating, electricity and insurance which must be paid regardless of what is happening in the building.

Murphy described the center as up and running, and incredibly efficient.

She said President Joe Biden understands the importance of getting more vaccine to states, and she expects availability to increase under the new administration.

Michelle Brunetti-Post
Press of Atlantic City

VIDEO

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