

Governor Phil Murphy

Governor Murphy Visits Iglesia Pentecostal Assemblies Community-Based Vaccination Site

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TRENTON — For Gladys Crespo, the Moderna vaccine was like manna from heaven.

She was among dozens vaccinated Tuesday to a round of applause at one of Trenton's largest Spanish-speaking congregations, the Iglesia Pentecostal Asamblea de Dios, while Gov. Phil Murphy looked on.

"Congratulations," Murphy told Crespo after she received a quick shot in the arm.

"We are privileged to have you," Crespo told Murphy through a translator.

"Make sure she knows this is the real boss," the governor said, pointing to Judy Persichilli, the state health commissioner who he refers to at coronavirus briefings as the "woman who needs no introduction."

The capital city's ornate and cavernous 76,100-square-foot house of worship, built in 1929 by Philadelphia architect Walter Hankin, was chosen as one of several statewide pop-up sites for underprivileged communities as officials try to chip away at racial disparities in COVID-19 vaccinations immunizations. Blacks and Latinos still only account for about 9 percent of the 1.7 million vaccines administered statewide.

Of roughly 2,000 people vaccinated in Trenton, the number is closer to 40 percent Black and Latino, Trenton Mayor Reed Gusciora said.

He credited the governor for trying to increase access to the neediest and most vulnerable populations.

"It's a laudable goal," Gusciora said, who was out Tuesday doing last-minute canvassing in the city's East Ward to get people signed up for vaccines at the church later in the week.

Officials expect to inoculate 1,500 people by the end of the week.

The church, which Murphy hailed as "really impressive," was selected because it's big enough to accommodate large crowds, with a massive amphitheater-like observation area capable of seating about 3,000 people. And it's also a safe space for many capital city residents, especially among Latinos endeared to the church's leader.

"It's an honor for us that he's here to help take care of the Hispanic community," Pastor Jose Rodriguez said of Murphy. "We are very pleased to do it."

Rodriguez, who also received his first dose of the vaccine, said he and others preach to congregants, some vulnerable immigrants distrustful of the government, about the importance of getting vaccinated.

"A lot of people get scared because they think they're going to get followed or traced because of the vaccine," said Martin Melgarejo, an audio engineer and production company owner.

Throughout the pandemic, the 35-year-old from Monroe has helped coordinate the technical aspects of the church's in-person and online services.

He didn't want to potentially sicken his wife and two children, ages 3 and nine months, while being in the community as New Jerseyans settle back into something resembling normalcy as Murphy eased restrictions on houses of worship as the state's numbers improve.

"I just try to help people so they can spread the word of God," Melgarejo said. "It was great to see him ... to see somebody that cares, and cares about us."

The nationwide death toll from the pandemic has exceeded more than a half-million Americans, including more than 20,000 in New Jersey, numbers that Murphy decried in an interview with Univision as "staggering."

"These were individual precious lives that were lived and now are lost, and you have to remember the individuals and the families they've left behind," the governor said.

Isaac Avilucea
Reporter
The Trentonian

VIDEO

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