

Navajo Nation COVID vaccine roll-out begins as deaths rise

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Window Rock, December 18 (RHC)-- The U.S. Navajo Nation reported 160 new cases of COVID-19 on Thursday, as public health authorities continued the first round of vaccinations among the hard-hit Indigenous population in the southwestern United States.

A first shipment of roughly 3,900 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine that arrived earlier this week was being administered to front-line healthcare workers and staff in long-term care facilities, Dr Loretta Christensen, chief medical officer of the Navajo Area Indian Health Service (NAIHS), told reporters in Window Rock, Arizona.

“All of our major facilities in Navajo received a portion of vaccines, and all of them have been administering vaccines, with the anticipation of finishing all vaccines by this weekend,” Christensen said.

The vaccination effort is under way after the Navajo Nation, an area larger than West Virginia that stretches across four states and effectively serves as a reservation for its population of roughly 170,000

people, reported a spike in COVID-19 infections in October.

On December 8, amid the second wave of the pandemic, it recorded a record-high 230 seven-day average of new infections, according to state data compiled by the Navajo Nation. Its highest seven-day average during the first wave of the pandemic was 132, reported on May 19th.

Since the crisis began, the Navajo Nation has reported more than 20,000 COVID-19 cases and 731 deaths linked to the virus, including four additional deaths reported on Thursday. The Navajo Nation began curfews in November as cases rose, and there were a three-week shelter-in-place order and 57-hour weekend lockdowns that began on December 7 and will last until December 28th.

Christensen said that pending approval from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the health service hopes to receive another shipment of about 7,800 Moderna vaccines by next week. The final number of doses will be confirmed the day before shipment, she said.

The Navajo Nation was one of the U.S.'s first COVID-19 hotspots earlier in the year. At the peak of its outbreak in May and June, it registered 2,304.41 cases per 100,000 people, while New York, the other early US hotspot, had a rate of 1,806 per 100,000, according to Johns Hopkins University data cited by CNN.

The first COVID wave occurred when the rest of the US was not experiencing a peak in cases, Christensen explained, so there was a greater availability of resources for the Navajo Nation.

More volunteers also were deployed to work to contain the spread of the virus, as tribal leaders called on Washington to send funds.

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