

Huffman, experts address vaccine questions in town hall

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Congressman Jared Huffman held a town hall Feb. 3 to share information about the state of the COVID-19 pandemic in the northern portion of his congressional district, from Del Norte County to Mendocino County.

Among many topics up for discussion during the pandemic, Huffman and a panel of experts focused on the COVID-19 vaccine rollout.

“It is the most hopeful part of this crisis,” Huffman said in his opening comments. “The fact that we, in less than a year, have multiple safe, effective vaccines that can save lives and accelerate our path out of this. But it’s also a frustrating issue right now, because the rollout’s been slower than any of us want, and it can be confusing, because there’s a lot of changing and seemingly contradictory information out there.”

Huffman said he’s seen changes in the country’s response to the pandemic in the time since President Joe Biden was inaugurated.

“Even though it’s only been a few days, I already see major changes in our national response to this pandemic,” Huffman said. “There’s a new focus on science, on consistent messaging, on transparency, on accountability.”

He pointed to Biden’s goal of administering 100 million doses nationwide in the president’s first 100 days in office. That goal gets to the heart of the biggest barrier the panel said counties and health care providers are facing in completing vaccinations: a slow trickle of supply.

“I think what we’re seeing in California here is that the infrastructure is taking great shape, and I think there’s counties that are doing a fabulous job of being able to administer the vaccine, but the weak link is the amount of vaccine,” said Assembly Member Jim Wood, who joined the town hall. “So the sooner we get that and have it in a reliable way, the sooner we’re going to all be much better off.”

Both county health officials participating in the town hall agreed with that assessment.

“Supply is really the main issue at hand right now,” said Dr. Ian Hoffman, Humboldt County public health officer.

Most counties in California have been rolling out the vaccine in the same way, distributing doses of vaccines to hospitals and other providers and allowing eligible individuals to register for vaccination appointments.

In Mendocino County, over 15% of those over 16 years old have received a vaccine, according to Dr. Andy Coren, the county’s public health officer.

“In Mendocino County, we have focused on those tiers for equity and ethical distribution of these scarce supplies, and we’ve made pretty much through the phase 1 Teir — one, two and three — and are firmly in 1B,” Coren said. “Based on some outbreaks we had, we moved up law enforcement, the sheriff’s department, and also water and waste disposal, since we did not want to risk another kind of epidemic.”

VA hospitals, which are distributing vaccines to veterans across the state, are also receiving doses in “fits and starts,” according to Heather Nye, associate chief of medicine at the San Francisco VA Medical Center, which has a facility in Eureka.

“As soon as we hit steady state, we may be told to stop, or we may be blessed with a windfall of doses.”

The public health officials also responded to a handful of questions about vaccinations during Huffman’s town hall.

One question asked why the state was prioritizing elderly people to receive first and second doses of the vaccine, rather than using those doses to get first doses to a broader population, especially as variants of the virus which may spread faster have begun to appear in the state.

Coren responded by saying that, since the current forms of the vaccine require two doses to be fully effective, fully vaccinating the elderly is a safer strategy.

“The issue with the elderly is that they’re the most vulnerable,” Coren said. “From an ethical point of view, we want to save the most lives. And from a practical point of view, we want to keep our hospitals and emergency rooms available, so we can take care of not only them, and not only people with COVID, but people who have heart attacks and get involved in accidents.”

Providers have been very careful about keeping track of those second doses, since there’s a few-day window in which someone needs to get a second dose of the vaccine in order for it to be most effective, the health officials said.

“We very much worry where the next dose is coming (from), whether it’s the first dose or the second dose,” Coren said.

To help with supply tracking and planning, Coren and the other experts recommended individuals get their COVID-19 doses in their home counties, and make sure to get their second doses at the same places they got their first.

Another question focused on the now-common virus precautions of limiting gatherings and wearing masks — and if those precautions could go away once someone is vaccinated.

Probably not for a while, the doctors agreed.

“I wish it were that simple that as soon as we had our two doses we could go back to our normal life,” Humboldt County’s Hoffman said. “As a society, we need to keep up all the measures that we have been doing.”

Until a large swath of the population is vaccinated, Hoffman said those precautions will likely still be important to slow the virus and to prevent the spread of its newer variations.

The public health experts also took questions about misleading information about the vaccine’s safety. In response, they pointed out the importance of recognizing misinformation, and reinforced the fact that studies of the vaccines have proven them to be safe and effective.

Still, Nye said those concerns about vaccine safety can’t be ignored, and she encouraged anyone with concerns about the vaccine’s safety or effectiveness to talk them over with their health care provider or local public health expert.

“I think the most important thing with vaccine hesitancy is we hear it out,” Nye said. “I think continuing the conversation is the most important thing.”

During the town hall, which is available on Huffman’s Facebook page for viewing in full, the elected officials and public health experts encouraged residents to be patient to receive a vaccine, and watch out for information from their health care providers and counties about their eligibility.

“While we’re in that race for more vaccine and more vaccinations, it is more important than ever right now for us to follow the strict guidelines and keep this virus at bay,” Humboldt County’s Hoffman said. “That’s

going to take time. So in the meantime we all need to stay really close to home and do all of our measures we've been doing to stop the spread.”