

State limits sites to get vaccine

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Mary Gander, RN, administers a COVID-19 vaccine to Milton Blue, of Farrell, during a Walberg Family Pharmacy vaccine clinic last month at Valley Baptist Church in Farrell.

TANNER MONDOK | Herald file

The state Department of Health's decision last month to decrease the number of COVID-19 vaccine providers is an effort to streamline the vaccine process and get more doses throughout Pennsylvania, said a department spokesman.

"Pharmacies who are not receiving the vaccine, it is not from punishment because they didn't do a good job," said Barry Ciccocioppo, spokesman for the state Department of Health.

After the move, many smaller pharmacies, including Jamestown-based Walberg Family Pharmacies, have been shut out of receiving first doses of the vaccine.

Ciccocioppo said all providers who have given first doses will receive second doses. Patients who have received their first doses of the COVID-19 vaccine and have appointments for their second dose should keep those appointments, even if it is with pharmacies or providers that are no longer receiving first doses.

Under the new vaccine distribution plan, the federal government is supplying vaccine doses only to Rite Aid and Giant Eagle pharmacies. Ciccocioppo said the state Department of Health chose additional medical facilities in territory not easily covered by the two large pharmacy chains to avoid having too many providers in the same areas.

According to the Department of Health website, the following organizations in Mercer County are receiving first doses from the state: Primary Health Network in Sharon, Sharon Regional Medical Center, Green Street Primary Care in Farrell, UPMC Horizon Transitional Care in Farrell, Primary Health Network-Mercer Primary Care in Mercer, Allegheny Health Network Grove City Medical Center and Greenville Community Health Center in Greenville.

Ciccocioppo said the Department of Health surveyed providers available and chose those that were booking all their possible appointments and were equitably distributed among urban and rural populations throughout the state.

Even though Walberg did a good job delivering vaccines, Ciccocioppo said it was disqualified on geographic considerations.

"It's just that we had to reduce the number of vaccine providers so we could provide more vaccines as possible to fewer providers at once," Ciccocioppo said.

The move is only temporary, based on the expectation that the state will receive more vaccine doses.

"Once we get more vaccine in the state from the federal level, then we will provide the vaccine to the local pharmacies," Ciccocioppo said.

He estimated that it could be in another three to four weeks.

"It depends on how much of the vaccine we are getting from the federal government at once," Ciccocioppo said. "Once more vaccine is being produced than there is demand, we can expand to those providers who want to distribute it."