

NC COVID-19 Farmworker Vaccination Monthly Newsletter—November 2021

Created by the Office of Rural Health, NC Farmworker Health Program and the Division of Public Health, Communicable Disease Branch.

The NC Department of Health and Human Services has implemented the COVID-19 Farmworker Vaccination Plan to get farmworkers vaccinated as quickly as possible.

This month we celebrate 28,467 total doses administered!

Sharing Our Successes

Caring for All of North Carolina's Agricultural Community



Kate Douglass at the reception hub in Vass, NC.

If anyone is capable of being in more than one place at a time, it would be Kate Douglass, Reception Hub Coordinator for the North Carolina Farmworker Health Program (NCFHP). With experience in humanitarian work through her time with Doctors Without Borders and as an integral part of the NCFHP COVID-response team, Douglass is no stranger to rallying people around shared goals that put the people served first.

“Did you know the Christmas tree chosen for the White House this year is from a farm in North Carolina,” asked Douglass. “Think about all the work that goes into getting that tree to the White House, and your tree into your home. Take a moment to appreciate the hard work that has happened over the past few years.”

Douglass is referring to the more than 70,000 farmworkers who come to North Carolina every year to harvest our food and Christmas trees. She is referring to a massive movement of people willing to come up from Mexico and make their way from Eastern North Carolina to the mountains, people who leave behind their homes and

families for several months of the year, who face significant risk of COVID due to cramped living quarters, shared transportation, and a work environment that does not allow for social distancing. She's also referring to the people who mobilized across the state to protect farmworkers by making sure they had access to COVID-19 testing and vaccines.

One component of the State's vaccination strategy was to establish a centralized hub to vaccinate arriving farmworkers with H-2A visas. As the pandemic went on, seasons ended, and farmworkers began returning to Mexico, the reception hub became a departure hub where workers could get their second vaccine dose or booster before making the long journey back home. Maintaining ongoing vaccination services such as this required the help of healthcare providers, volunteers and agencies across the state.

RCL Labs, a State-contracted vaccination provider, is one of those partners, and Donna Jones, lovingly referred to as Ms. Donna, came out of retirement at the beginning of the pandemic to help where she could be of service. "I just want to do my part," she said. "My heart goes out to [the farmworkers]. They want to work. They cut our trees at Christmas time. They pick the vegetables. They're willing to come here and do it for little. I try to make them feel welcome when they get here. They're trusting that what we're doing will help them. So, I try to make them feel comfortable. I'm even trying to learn a little Spanish!"



Donna Jones prepares to vaccinate farmworkers before they return to Mexico.

working alongside his wife Sadith Salek, since the early days of the reception hub in April 2021. NC DHHS contracted with Spanglish Unlimited to provide quality interpretation services. To supplement these efforts, volunteers and CHWs, such as the Saleks, came to help however they could. "Most of us have known each



Farmworker Leonardo Ortiz García shares that it's better to be safe and protect his family any way he can by getting vaccinated.

Arriving staffers and volunteers greet Ms. Donna as they arrive, some stopping to give her a hug and one commenting on how blessed she is to work with her. Ms. Donna explains that they've been through a lot together. She shares that working with RCL has given her an opportunity to learn about other cultures and the diversity of people in rural North Carolina, including the farmworkers. She looks around at the buses beginning to arrive with workers. "I never even knew this existed."

Nelson Salek has been a community health worker (CHW) with Southeastern Healthcare of North Carolina,

other since the beginning and now here we are at the last event,” he said. “It’s nice the farmworkers can return to their country safe and fully vaccinated.”



Reception hub staff and volunteers set up tents in preparation for the vaccination event

Salek shared that as a CHW, he not only interprets, but also welcomes workers, thanks them for their hard work and sacrifice, and offers support as he can. “The farmworkers are willing to talk about their experiences with us, their families, the good things, the bad things...they are eager to talk with us. I love it. I try to give them some advice or encouragement or find a way to help them feel better.”

Douglass reflects on the past year and recognizes that it can be hard in an emergency to slow down and take time to get to know the population one is serving.

“People took the time to speak with folks passing through about their families, their concerns, what their work is like. The time taken to understand the population and then adapt is what made it such a pleasure to work with this team and what made the services so meaningful.”

While some came to the reception hub without prior knowledge of farmworkers, others came with years of experience working with farmworker communities. One such person was Juan Allen, patient navigator with Access East, a nonprofit dedicated to coordinating access to quality care for Eastern North Carolina’s most vulnerable.

“Kudos to Kate Douglass,” said Allen, “Every week there were changes. It was really challenging. She put the team together, and she was the captain. She saw a problem and then made sure it was addressed for the next time. Every day was something new, and then by the end it was smooth and easy. Just the other day we were able to handle 400 farmworkers with only 8 people.”

Allen was not only consistently involved in the reception hub, but also was tirelessly out visiting camps, building relationships with growers, providing health education, Affordable Care Act assistance, and connecting farmworkers to needed care.



NCFHP Medical Director Dr. Modjolie Moore and Kate Douglass

“I lost seven patients to COVID,” he reflected before sharing the unexpected gift of the pandemic. “COVID has taught us that we can work together. Now we know we can work together.”

Douglass agrees, and adds that working together also brings greater awareness. “People will remember how important it is to think about how we care for the people in our community, and how everyone faces different challenges that require different responses. Farmworkers are essential here and globally. We need to think about them when we think

about North Carolina’s agricultural community.”

Vaccination Program Updates

As we are winding down for 2021, we are grateful for everyone who came together to ensure the safety and well-being of the farmworker community. We are currently strategizing how best to approach 2022. Please be on the lookout for updates from our team regarding our COVID-19 response plan for next year.

Guidance for boosters and pediatric (ages 5 to 11) vaccine is continuously being updated. Our team is keeping up with the most recent guidance from the FDA and CDC to provide our local partners and team members with the tools, guidance, and materials needed to guide individuals to make informed decisions to keep themselves and their community safe.

By the Numbers: A Look at the Data

The farmworker vaccination plan was initiated statewide on March 3, 2021. Local teams are tasked to complete an online survey every two weeks to track their progress, including the number of farmworkers vaccinated through their efforts and the number of workers who they are aware declined vaccination.

According to reported data, vaccine acceptance among the overall farmworker population continues to be high.

From April 9 to November 19, there were 51 vaccination events held at the reception hub in a centralized location, providing 5,318 vaccine doses to H-2A workers upon their arrival, departure, or transfer to another farm within North Carolina.

Summary of events held at the reception hub

# of Events	54
# Vaccination Events	49
# Education Only Events	5

Total vaccines administered by type at the reception hub

J&J	4,443
Moderna 1st Dose	372
Moderna 2nd Dose	0
Moderna Booster	528
Pfizer 1st Dose	2
Pfizer 2nd Dose	6

The summary of the data below through November 26, 2021, is from the reception hub and as reported by the local teams.

Vaccination effort	Doses administered	Number fully vaccinated
Local teams	23,149	10,020
Initial series*	22,702	
Boosters	447	
Reception hub	5,318	4,403
Initial series	4,815	
Boosters	503	
Total	28,467	14,423

*Includes doses administered when type of dose not reported.

Data limitations: Survey data provide a snapshot of local team efforts, not a complete picture of farmworker vaccine access and uptake. These numbers are expected to be undercounts and do not include people vaccinated independently of local teams and reception hub events. Occupation data are not routinely collected during vaccine registration. Additional data are pending from 8 of 100 local teams.

Overall number of vaccinations includes farmworkers, farmers and farm staff members.

If you have any questions or concerns, you can email us at vaccine4farmworkers@dhhs.nc.gov

