DHSS Tests Using Paratransit to Help Bring COVID-19 Vaccine to Vulnerable Delawareans

NEW CASTLE (March 12, 2021) – The Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) began a test mobile vaccination effort on March 5 in western Sussex County by partnering with the Delaware Transit Corporation (DTC) to utilize DART's Paratransit fleet to bring COVID-19 vaccinations to some of Delaware's most vulnerable citizens who have been homebound through much of the pandemic. DHSS Secretary Molly Magarik said the small pilot will be assessed and evaluated to determine its sustainability.

As part of the test, DHSS asked the Delaware Transit Corporation to examine its customer rosters in western Sussex County for Phase 1B seniors 65 and older who have limited access to other vaccination opportunities because of chronic illness or disability. Western Sussex County was chosen for the pilot because of the area's consistently high rates of COVID-19 of infection and death during the pandemic, an elevated level of low-income households and high rates of chronic disease among seniors.

Many of the individuals that DART Paratransit served on a routine basis prior to the public health emergency are also among those most at risk from contracting COVID-19 and most likely to develop serious health outcomes from the disease. That means that many of these individuals have been isolated at home since the pandemic began and may not be able to safely access a vaccination site.

"We know that many of the individuals who access Paratransit services are some of our most vulnerable citizens," Secretary Magarik said. "We started this test with seniors 65 or older who have disabilities, severe chronic illnesses or serious health issues that make leaving their homes in the middle of a pandemic a risky undertaking. These same concerns also impact their ability to get to vaccination sites. With this test run and its subsequent evaluation, we hope to explore ways to involve other partners across the state so the mobile vaccination can be scaled up to meet the expected demand."

The idea for the mobile vaccination effort originated with DHSS' Division of Developmental Disabilities Services. "Before the pandemic, many of the individuals served by DDDS followed a daily routine of using DART Paratransit to access their community, whether that meant heading to an employment or rehabilitative program," said Cory Nourie, Director of Community Services for the Division of Developmental Disabilities Services. "DART Paratransit was their connection to those sites and their communities. That's when it occurred to us to use DART Paratransit to reach these individuals with vaccine, effectively running the route in reverse. Rather than picking up passengers, they can deliver nurses and vaccinations."

John Sisson, CEO of DTC, said once he heard the idea, it just made sense. "We already have all of the information we need to do this. We know who we support, where they live, and who might live nearby to ensure we can vaccinate as many people as possible in a single trip."

Sisson said he viewed the test run as an important opportunity, too, for Paratransit drivers. "Paratransit drivers have a deep commitment to their work and develop important and meaningful relationships with the folks they serve," he said. "These last 12 months have been hard. This gives us a great opportunity to re-establish those bonds, those relationships. Our drivers are proud to be working with the Department of Health and Social Services on this effort."