

'Today is a victory': BC hosts first mass drive-thru COVID-19 vaccine distribution in Kern

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Kern County Supervisor Leticia Perez receives a Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine on Sunday from Bakersfield College registered nursing faculty member Paloma Esparza.

- Christine L. Peterson / The Californian

They're not celebrating at Disneyland quite yet, but you might have thought those at Bakersfield College on Sunday had already arrived at the happiest place on earth.

Cars and trucks lined up to make their way into the parking lot abutting University Avenue for a poke in the arm in the form of one of 1,000 Johnson & Johnson vaccine doses.

The event was dubbed the first mass drive-thru COVID-19 vaccine clinic in Kern County, and you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone who wasn't smiling. This vaccine requires just one dose, unlike the Pfizer and Moderna versions that require two.

"Today is a victory," declared Kern County Supervisor Leticia Perez, one of many speakers to herald a strong collaboration that brought the shots to Kern County.

While there have been other vaccine opportunities — at pharmacies, hospitals, the Kern County Fairgrounds and the UFW's Forty Acres among them — Sunday's event was heralded as the first mass drive-thru opportunity.

A deep collaboration was at play — several community groups, the Central Labor Council, the college and its nursing students and so many more.

BC spokeswoman Norma Rojas-Mora said Perez inquired whether the college could serve as a vaccination site. Then many hands worked to pull it off.

"We are always talking about getting more vaccines into the Central Valley," said Assemblyman Rudy Salas, D-Bakersfield.

In fact, at first Gov. Gavin Newsom allocated 500 vaccines for Sunday. But various conversations led to the delivery of 1,000 doses. Salas noted efforts are underway to secure a quarter of a million vaccines for the Central Valley.

Jay Tamsi, co-founder of the Kern County Latino COVID-19 Task Force, reflected on the fact people have endured so much in the past year — death, illness, isolation and more.

"Today, ladies and gentlemen, we see hope," Tamsi said. "We see bright light at the end of the tunnel."

Speaker upon speaker shared similar sentiments as lines of people formed to drive up to administration stations, get the vaccine, then wait the appointed time for an "all clear" to leave.

"We are locking arms with the community to stop the spread," said Romeo Agbalog, a trustee of the Kern Community College District, of which Bakersfield College is a part.

David Torres, chairman of the Centric Health Foundation, noted all the work being done in service to others.

Imelda Ceja-Butkiewicz, president of the Kern Inyo Mono Central Labor Council, spoke with great excitement about delivering the vaccine to more essential workers. She said if Sunday's event turned out perfect — noting full confidence that it would — the groups would get more vaccine into the Central Valley.

"We can do this. We can save lives," Ceja-Butkiewicz said with a wide smile.

And after that, BC registered nursing faculty member Paloma Esparza, the supervisor of Sunday's clinic, plunged a needle into Perez's arm, giving her the first shot of the day.

"You know how I feel?" Perez said after the quick prick. "I feel vaccinated!"

Friendly banter about soon being ready for Disneyland ensued.