

Health Agency Slowly Spending Covid Money

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By Rick Brundrett - The Nerve

A state House proposal would send an additional \$63 million out of state surplus funds to the Department of Health and Environmental Control to speed up COVID-19 vaccinations and continue testing statewide.

But DHEC has spent only about 60% of the \$45 million in state surplus funds awarded to the agency last March to combat the coronavirus, and less than a third of the collective \$261 million in federal funding received since the outbreak hit South Carolina, The Nerve found in a review of the agency's latest spending report.

There have been a total of 5,944 confirmed coronavirus deaths and 381,812 confirmed cases in South Carolina since the start of the outbreak through Sunday, according to DHEC records.

As of Tuesday, the state ranked last in the country in total distributed COVID-19 vaccines per 100,000 residents (10,092), and had the 12th-worst ranking among states for administered vaccinations per 100,000 (6,161), federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention records show.

The Nerve on Monday sent written questions to DHEC asking, among other things, for an explanation of its relatively low spending of the earlier-awarded state and federal funds, and specifics on its plans to speed up vaccines statewide.

An agency spokeswoman acknowledged receiving the questions, though no response was provided by publication of this story.

The Biden administration on Tuesday announced it would increase the supply of vaccines sent to states by about 16% over the next three weeks. Meanwhile, the DHEC board decided Tuesday to allocate vaccines to counties on a per-capita basis until supplies increase, according to a story in The State newspaper.

DHEC's latest monthly [spending report](#), posted on the S.C. Department of Administration's website, shows a total of about \$108.4 million in COVID-19 spending since the start of the outbreak last spring through Jan. 1. That amount represented 35.4% of the collective \$306.1 million in received state and federal funding over the period, The Nerve's review found.

Specifics of the spent amounts weren't listed in the report, though it gave spending totals in the following categories:

- Testing: \$50.3 million;
- Personnel: \$27.6 million;
- Personal protective equipment (PPE)/medical supplies: \$12.1 million;
- Contact tracing: \$6.8 million;

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- Technology/staff support/cleaning/other: \$4.8 million;
- Education campaign: \$4.4 million;
- Transportation/storage: \$1.7 million;
- Quarantine costs: \$297,909;
- Vaccines: \$121,959

In a letter to lawmakers last March, then-DHEC director Rick Toomey said out of the \$45 million in state surplus funds awarded then to the agency, \$14.8 million would be used to purchase PPE items for DHEC workers, while \$14.5 million would go for additional DHEC staffing to support disease surveillance and contact investigation, laboratory testing, and information phone lines.

The Nerve in May [reported](#) that DHEC had spent less than 10% of the \$45 million. As of Jan. 1, the agency had spent \$26.8 million, or 59.6%, of the total, including \$8.4 million for PPE items and medical supplies, \$5.5 million on personnel, \$4.2 million on its education campaign, \$4 million on testing, and \$1.1 million for contact tracing, records show.

In an email response to The Nerve in October, the agency said it had hired more than 700 workers – the vast majority of them part-time – as of September to assist the agency in “emergency coordination and response, testing, contact investigations, and data analytics.” As of Jan. 20, the agency had 3,008 employees, according to Department of Administration records.

A [joint resolution](#) approved Monday by the S.C. House Ways and Means Committee would give DHEC an additional \$63 million out of state surplus funds to “expand statewide vaccination capacity” and “continue to administer the statewide COVID-19 testing plan” in collaboration with the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC), South Carolina Hospital Association and other federally qualified health centers.

In a written update included in the agenda materials for today’s scheduled meeting of the state Joint Bond Review Committee, DHEC said that as of Jan. 12, it had administered 166,437 vaccine doses and received more than 4 million test results.

The joint resolution, which was introduced Tuesday in the full House, also authorizes allocating \$45 million to MUSC and creates a \$100 million reserve account for future vaccine expenses.

Lawmakers in June and September earmarked a total of about \$115.5 million in federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) funds to DHEC for statewide testing and monitoring. As of Jan. 1, \$41.8 million of the total, or 36.2%, had been spent; DHEC in its latest spending report noted it had submitted invoices for the entire remaining balance.

All of a separate \$1 million federal grant received in July has been spent, while 90% of another \$8.9 million federal grant received in March was spent as of Jan. 1, according to DHEC’s latest report.

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However, as of Jan. 1, DHEC had spent relatively little from nine other federal COVID-19 grants received since March, with spending rates per grant ranging from 0.52% to 28.6%, The Nerve's review found.
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The amount of the nine grants totaled \$135.7 million, including a \$118.6 million grant received in May to "develop, purchase, administer, process, and analyze COVID-19 tests, conduct surveillance, trace contacts, and related activities," DHEC records show.

But of the \$118.6 million grant, \$27.2 million, or about 23%, had been spent as of Jan. 1, according to records.

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