

Vaccine...from Page 1A

People can check back in with District 2 Public Health for further announcements regarding how to get in line for vaccination at <http://phdistrict2.org>.

Currently, early vaccination efforts are focused on medical workers who face greater risk of exposure, and on long-term care residents/staff. But starting Jan. 11, in addition to everyone 65 years of age and older, law enforcement and fire personnel will also be eligible for vaccination.

This news comes after Gov. Brian Kemp and Public Health Commissioner Dr. Kathleen Toomey said in a Dec. 30 press release that “the expanded administration of vaccine is expected to begin within the next two weeks provided there is adequate vaccine supply available.”

Eventually, there will be enough vaccine available for all who want it, but until such a time, the state is working to finalize the various elements

of a vaccine distribution plan that implements a phased allocation due to limited initial supply.

Vaccination has continued by health care providers who applied to receive the vaccine for early rollout, which started locally the week of Dec. 21 with the arrival of the first shipments of Moderna vaccine doses.

This includes Union General Health System, Synergy Health of Hiawassee, Blairsville Internal Medicine, and a joint effort by the Union and Towns County Health Departments.

Currently, the Health Departments, Synergy Health and Union General are providing the vaccine to eligible people outside of their respective offices.

Union General focused its initial vaccination efforts at its own hospitals and nursing homes, though it is now branching out to other medical workers in the community, like

home health professionals and local doctor’s offices.

With more than 2,500 patients, the vast majority of whom are over the age of 65 and therefore higher risk individuals, Blairsville Internal Medicine will be concentrating its vaccinations in-house for the time being, including staff.

Synergy Health is designated as a mass vaccine provider, and it made good on that status by expanding its offerings last week to interested Towns County medical first responders, a dozen of whom lined up at the E-911 Dispatch Center for a drive-thru vaccination clinic Dec. 29.

Additionally, Synergy Health visited Brasstown Manor Senior Living in Hiawassee last week to vaccinate residents and staff there.

For their part, Brasstown Manor residents receiving the vaccine were overjoyed with the knowledge that vaccination is a crucial step toward regaining some normalcy and respite from their isolation.

“There was an energy that was so positive,” Dr. Samuel L. Church of Synergy Health said, comparing the excitement for the vaccine there to the applause he



A Synergy Health employee vaccinates a Brasstown Manor resident on Dec. 30. Residents receiving COVID vaccinations that day were overjoyed at the opportunity, which potentially heralds a return to normalcy in the near future.

Photo by Larson Church

experienced at his own office upon arrival of the first doses. “They are so eager to get their lives back.”

Added Church, “A lot of the residents were asking, ‘Does this mean we (don’t have to) be quarantined anymore?’ I had to tell them they’re not quite done with their mask yet or with their local quarantine.”

Church performed a few hymns on the piano as his team vaccinated residents and staff of Brasstown Manor, which has been fortunate not to have experienced an outbreak of the virus, per the Department of Community Health’s COVID-19 Long-Term Care Facility Report.

“There’s been such a problem nationally with assisted living facilities having just terrible devastation from the virus that all of them have very rigid precautions, and they are ready to be free,” Church said.

Synergy Health has been coordinating with the local Health Department to try to get the vaccine administered to as many eligible people as possible, and Church said he looks forward to continuing that partnership to help more people as vaccine supplies increase.

Church said residents aged 65 and older can call his office at 706-896-0505 to be added to the list for vaccinations that can begin Jan. 11. People outside the initial vaccine distribution regime will have to wait for public health guidelines to specify their eligibility.

“We have had enormous community interest, whether it’s our patients or not, that have been wanting to be vaccinated,” Church said, reiterating that more people will become eligible as vaccine availability increases throughout the year.

As of Dec. 31, nearly 600,000 Georgians had received their first vaccine dose against COVID-19.

People can visit <https://dph.georgia.gov/covid-vaccine> for information about the vaccine generally and the distribution plan moving forward.

So far, not all local medical first responders have wanted the vaccine, which hasn’t been formally authorized by the Food and Drug Administration and deploys a technology that’s new in terms of use in humans.

There are several side effects associated with COVID-19 vaccination, such as fever, headache, and rarer but more serious complications, though the most common side effect has been injection site soreness.

People must weigh the risks individually, of course, in consultation with health care providers. But for the most vulnerable to hospitalization and death, many doctors believe the risks of an emergency use authorized vaccine are unlikely to be greater than the risks of COVID itself.

Dr. Church said people may experience more intense side effects with the follow-up booster shot, though those have shown to be mostly mild as well. He said this is because, after the first dose, people’s immune systems are ready to respond more aggressively.

In terms of COVID-19 prevalence, pretty much everywhere in the US is seeing a winter surge, including the North Georgia Mountains area. This is not entirely unexpected, as the late fall, winter and early spring months are known collectively to make up the respiratory virus season.

Still, Union General Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett said hospitalizations do appear to be up compared to this same time in past years, and COVID hospitalizations specifically are higher currently than at any other point since the pandemic began.

Because of COVID’s high prevalence in the community and abroad, Barnett is urging people to remain

diligent in following COVID recommended practices such as social distancing, wearing masks, washing hands, etc., and to get vaccinated as soon as it becomes available to them.

She sees light at the end of the tunnel thanks to the vaccine but also recognizes there’s more tunnel left to go. As such, she’s also urging people not to avoid medical care generally, saying folks should make sure to go to regular checkups and seek help with personal medical concerns.

As far as COVID-19 testing goes, since Nov. 30, the local Health Department has been holding 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. clinics five days a week to allow people greater opportunities to get tested for free.

Starting Jan. 11, however, local testing will be offered “for symptomatic first responders, school employees and court system personnel by appointment” in this same time slot.

Testing for specific occupations only will be replacing general testing locally, so Jan. 11 forward, people looking for free Health Department testing will have to go to 2500 Allen Creek Drive in Gainesville. This site will operate Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays from 8:30 a.m. to 12 p.m. by appointment only.

People can make an appointment by contacting the Call Center at 1-888-426-5073. Center hours are Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays from 7:30 am to 5 p.m., and Tuesdays from 7:30 am to 7:00 pm.

“This change will help meet the demand for providing vaccines to more people as we work through the phases identified by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,” District 2 Public Health said last week.

Suicide...from Page 1A

Wise was not visible from the road, Osborn said. Additional details were unavailable at press time.

Responding to the scene were the Union County Sheriff’s Office and Fire Department, Union General EMS,

as well as the Towns County Sheriff’s Office, Fire Rescue and EMS.

Osborn said that anyone experiencing suicidal thoughts should call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at (800) 273-TALK or (800) SUICIDE.

UCSO Compliance...from Page 1A

Regular monitoring by law enforcement ensures offenders are complying with the terms of their release, with all those registered having to self-report to the Sheriff’s Office annually.

Moving forward, Mangifesta said CID will be expanding internal monitoring efforts to include additional visits throughout each year

to the homes and workplaces of locally registered sex offenders.

In service of that mission, the new captain said the local Criminal Investigation Division under Sheriff Mason was proud, once again, to have been among the dozens of state sheriff’s offices participating in Operation Watchful Eye V, which ran Oct. 26-Nov. 29, 2020.

Sponsored by the Georgia Sheriffs’ Association, Operation Watchful Eye is a coordinated effort in which county sheriff’s offices from all over the state “conduct residence verifications and compliance checks of registered sex offenders during a specific time period.”

Sheriff’s offices are mandated by law to register sex offenders and inform the public of their general whereabouts. As part of this, deputies must verify addresses provided by registered sex offenders and ensure they are meeting any additional release requirements.

The 2020 iteration of Operation Watchful Eye involved 46 Georgia sheriff’s offices arresting 25 sex offenders and issuing 88 arrest warrants for violations of state registration laws. Fortunately, none of the individuals arrested or issued warrants in the operation were registered here.

“All of the 41 sex offenders living in Union County were compliant and not in violation of any of the sex offender laws of Georgia,” Mangifesta said. “Furthermore, we have no sex offenders that are homeless just wandering around Union County; in fact, many are gainfully employed.”

“These residential verifications were conducted by all of the detectives in the Criminal Investigation Division.

In the future, detectives will be making periodic unannounced verifications to ensure that all of the sex offenders in the county are compliant.”

Mangifesta reiterated that such “periodic unannounced verifications” will take place at a greater frequency in 2021 and beyond to further encourage registered sex offenders to remain vigilant in following the law.

“A lot of sex offenders are hardworking people,” Mangifesta said. “They’ve integrated back into society well, but they crossed that threshold years ago (and are now living with the consequences).”

Union County deputies also take part in an annual Halloween effort by local law enforcement to make sure sex offenders are not handing out candy to children, and the Sheriff’s Office will continue to participate in public oversight measures like Operation Watchful Eye.

According to the Georgia Sheriffs’ Association, Operation Watchful Eye V resulted in the preliminary reporting of 5,167 registered sex offenders, 144 predators and 55 homeless sex offenders living in the 46 participating counties.

And just as there are no homeless or absconded sex offenders in Union, Mangifesta said there are no “predators,” either, or individuals determined by a special state board “to be at risk of perpetrating any future dangerous sexual offense,” per the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

Visit the Georgia Sex Offender Registry at <http://gbi.georgia.gov/georgia-sex-offender-registry>. To view locally registered sex offenders, check out the Union County Sheriff’s Office website at <https://www.unioncountygasherriff.org/sexoffenders.html>.