

Vaccinations...from Page 1A

January, though Barnett remains optimistic a week into February, noting that the death rate has apparently slowed since last month.

As vaccine supplies increase and more people get the shot in the months ahead, the area, state and nation will hopefully begin to see a compounding of present improvements, as the U.S. starts to experience what could be a natural decline in the annual winter respiratory virus season.

The highly contagious COVID-19 seems to be outcompeting influenza for hosts as the dominant respiratory virus at present, resulting in an incredibly light flu season nationwide that may also be impacted by similar mitigations in place against COVID.

In Georgia, as COVID has been raging this winter, there have been zero laboratory-confirmed influenza outbreaks reported for the 2020-21 flu season, compared with 49 at this same point in the 2019-20 season, according to the latest Department of Public Health data.

That's not to say flu isn't spreading, just that it is spreading much less than in previous seasons; there have been, for example, some local influenza hospitalizations, but statewide, only two people had died as of Jan. 23 in the current flu season compared with 37 at this point in the last.

Generally speaking, the local hospitals screen for flu and strep as part of the routine work-up for patients presenting with influenza-like symptoms and swab for COVID when COVID-19 symptoms are present, with a few patients having tested positive for both flu and COVID.

Public health professionals recommend people keep up COVID best practices for the time being, including social distancing, limiting gatherings and wearing masks in public –

even after getting the vaccine.

Local Vaccinations Continue

On the local vaccination front, the Health Department is continuing its efforts to get the vaccine to as many people as possible, which presently means by appointment only.

Citing parking and building space constraints for on-premises mass vaccination, District 2 Public Health announced last week that its 13 county health departments would begin administering all COVID-19 vaccines at offsite facilities.

“For now, offsite facilities will provide a better environment for us to safely administer vaccine,” District 2 Public Information Officer Dave Palmer said. “These facilities will also enable us to increase the number of people we can vaccinate when our vaccine supply improves.”

Added Palmer, “We will continue essential services at the Health Department. These include school immunizations, women's health services, screenings for certain diseases, and communicable disease treatment.”

In Union County, Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, the Recreation Department and the Emergency Management Agency have teamed up to offer the new Union County Sports Center for use in Health Department vaccination efforts.

Until further notice, all local Health Department vaccine appointment holders will get their first and second shots at the Sports Center, which shut down for most public uses in mid-January due to COVID.

The Sports Center offers the perfect space to allow large numbers of people to move in an orderly fashion through the front of the building, into the Gold Gym for vaccination,

and over to the Purple Gym for observation before completing the circle and leaving through the front.

This is also where the county will host future mass clinics as supplies become available, like the highly successful partnership between Union County Government, EMA and Health Department on Jan. 22 that saw 1,050 vaccinations, with follow-up doses set for Feb. 19.

Due to concerns over gatherings amid COVID-19, the only publicly available activity in the Sports Center is walking, though the Rec Department is thankful the facility can be used as a site for vaccination to hopefully get the community to a place where people can return to regular activities.

“We hate to see this new facility not being able to be used for what it's intended for, but at least it's not sitting here empty, it is being used for a good cause,” Rec Director Larry Conley said.

In the meantime, outdoor recreational sports seasons are proceeding as planned, with registrations for upcoming soccer, baseball and softball seasons taking place at the Sports Center currently.

Vaccine Signups & Availability

Even though Public Health is not actively taking new appointments for COVID-19 vaccination due to limited availability of the vaccine, people trying for an appointment with the Health Department should still check the phdistrict2.org sign-up portal or call 770-531-5692.

“As we get vaccine in our counties, we are opening appointments in the Call Center and our online registration tool,” District 2 PIO Palmer said. “Because we aren't sure what we will receive, we don't announce that we are opening appointments.”

“We have also had people cancel appointments and those are added back to the calendar. For now, we ask everyone to check the online tool or call the Call Center to see if appointments are available.

“As vaccine becomes more steadily available in quantity, we plan to open appointments at a specific time on a certain day of the week, for the following week.”

Additionally, to take advantage of further collaborative efforts between the county and Health Department like the Jan. 22 mass clinic, be sure to check in regularly with unioncountyga.gov to see if and when new appointments come online as supplies become available.

Synergy Health is conducting vaccinations for area residents as well, and those wishing to get waitlisted for an appointment with the Hiawassee-based health practice can visit ngvax.com.

Union General Health System is not currently offering vaccines to the public, but once it finishes administering second doses in-house, Chief Nursing Officer Barnett said the hospitals would be happy to help with vaccinating eligible residents if their access to vaccine supplies continues.

Ingles Pharmacies are also waitlisting people for vaccination at <https://www.ingles-markets.com/pharmacy/pg1/pharmacy-sub/vaccinations>.

For a regularly updated list of locations receiving vaccine shipments in each county, visit dph.georgia.gov and click on the link for the “Vaccine Orders List.” People can also find vaccine providers at <https://dph.georgia.gov/locations/covid-vaccination-site>.

Appointments for free Public Health COVID-19 testing can be made at <https://mako.exchange/splash/GAmakotesting/>. This free testing is taking place in Hall County at 2500 Allen Creek Drive in Gainesville.

Matheson...from Page 1A

would become unnecessary if first the Grand Jury convenes next month as anticipated and indicts Matheson on charges stemming from the shooting.

For now, Matheson remains detained in the Towns County Jail without bond. He has been charged only and is presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

At the time of the shooting, his estranged wife, Crystal Matheson, had been issued a Domestic Violence Protection Order against her husband.

This is not Matheson's first family violence arrest, according to Hiawassee Chief Smith, who arrested Matheson in 2017 after he reportedly assaulted his own mother where they both worked.

He was also arrested twice last year for domestic violence-related crimes in Clay County, including on July 13, 2020, for assault by strangulation and again on Oct. 9, 2020, for violation of a Domestic Violence Order, Clay County Sheriff Bobby Deese said.

Crystal continues to recover in the hospital after suffering eight gunshot wounds

from the 9 mm handgun used against her on Jan. 26. She has been engaging with the public and asking for continued prayers on Facebook.

A GoFundMe has been set up for Crystal at <https://www.gofundme.com/f/recovery-for-crystal-matheson>.

“She is trying to recover in the hospital right now,” GoFundMe organizer Luke Goodman said. “She currently has everyday bills, utilities, and a mortgage to pay for, on top of

the hospital bills that she will soon have.

“We would also like to get her an attorney that specializes in domestic violence abuse. She has been through enough as it is before all of this happened!”

“We would like to ask everyone to help us reach our fundraiser goal for her. And also, please pray for her and a full recovery! She is a God-fearing, God-loving Christian and a wonderful person!”

Health Departments move Covid-19 Vaccinations to offsite clinics



Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

To maximize efficiency for vaccine delivery, District 2 Public Health Departments have coordinated with our community partners to locate vaccine clinics to larger spaces. “This move will allow our staff to provide both first and second doses at one location,” said Zachary Taylor, M.D., District Health Director. “Having a larger space than the health departments, will also give us flexibility to

vaccinate more people each day, especially when vaccine becomes more readily available.” Appointments will still be required to get vaccinated at the new clinic sites.

Essential services such as, immunizations for school, women's health services, and communicable disease services will be available at the health departments.

Towns County: Towns County Recreation Dept. - February 3 - 150 Foster Park Rd., Hiawassee, GA 30582

Union County: Union County Recreation Center - February 1 - 310 Wellborn Street, Blairsville, GA 30512.

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