

COVID Testing...from Page 1A

Public Health for information regarding isolating and contact tracing.

As Georgia heads deeper into the annual winter respiratory virus season, it appears that COVID-19 is outcompeting its viral competitors for number of infections. That's not to say influenza is not circulating, but it does appear to be down significantly compared to recent years.

By the last week of November 2019, the percentage of specimens testing positive for influenza by clinical laboratories was 20.15%.

In 2020? just 1.7%, per the Department of Public Health's Weekly Influenza Report.

And since the start of this year's "flu season" on Sept. 27, there have been zero flu outbreaks reported statewide, compared to 12 over the same period last year.

Regardless of what's circulating widely, people should continue to focus on improving their health generally, as well as following the recommended safety guidelines, which are likely to stay in place for some time even after a COVID-19 vaccine becomes available.

Speaking of, there's been a lot of buzz in recent weeks about the number of viable COVID-19 vaccines currently in development, with the Food and Drug Administration expected to start approving Emergency Use Authorizations for such vaccines any day now.

Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp met with hospital CEOs last week to discuss vaccine distribution plans in the state, according to WSB-TV Channel 2.

Kemp spoke of the upcoming Dec. 10 meeting of a special FDA Advisory Committee to decide the fate of the Emergency Use Authorization specifically for the "Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine for the prevention of COVID-19 in individuals 16 years of age and older."

"We expect anytime within a few days following that meeting, we should start receiving the first shipments of the vaccine. So that is fast approaching," Kemp said, according to Channel 2 reporting.

Moving forward, once the FDA approves any vaccine, an Advisory Committee with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will "review

all available data about that vaccine," after which it will "vote on whether to recommend the vaccine and, if so, who should receive it."

The CDC has already determined that approved vaccines should be offered in an initial phase to both health care personnel and residents of long-term care facilities.

After a vaccine makes it to this initial phase, the Georgia Department of Public Health will present a timeline for vaccine delivery to local health and long-term care establishments based on CDC guidance.

Additionally, the CDC has prioritized four categories of individuals for early access to the vaccine, including health care personnel; essential/critical industry workers; people at high risk for severe COVID-19 due to underlying medical conditions; and people 65 years and older.

"When a vaccine is authorized or approved in the United States, there may not be enough doses available for all adults," the CDC said. "Supplies will increase over time, and all adults should be able to get vaccinated later in 2021."

Vaccination in children is not currently being recommended due to lack of study, but the CDC has said "clinical trials continue to expand those recruited to participate," and that "the groups recommended to receive the vaccines could change in the future."

Fortunately, of all the age demographics, the health of children appears to be the least impacted by COVID-19.

In terms of cost to individuals, the CDC has said that vaccine doses purchased using tax dollars will be provided without charge.

"However, vaccine providers will be able to charge administration fees for giving or administering the shot to someone," the CDC said. "Vaccine providers can get this fee reimbursed by the patient's public or private insurance company or, for uninsured patients, by the Health Resources and Services Administration's Provider Relief Fund."

Another recent CDC development includes an adjustment to quarantine recommendations. CDC officials still advocate a 14-day quarantine after exposure to a positive-testing person or someone suspected of having COVID-19, but they've relaxed the guidance a bit.

"Reducing the length of quarantine may make it easier for people to quarantine by reducing the time they cannot work," the CDC said. "A shorter quarantine period also can lessen stress on the public health system, especially when new infections are rapidly rising."

Basically, people who have been exposed to a positive-testing person and do not develop symptoms may exit quarantine on Day 10 instead of after 14 days, or on Day 7 following exposure if the quarantining individual tests negative on Day 5 or later.

After stopping quarantine, people are advised to continue watching for symptoms until 14 days after exposure.

"If you have symptoms, immediately self-isolate and contact your local public health authority or healthcare provider," the CDC said. "Wear a mask, stay at least 6 feet from others, wash (your) hands, avoid crowds, and take other steps to prevent the spread of COVID-19."

Runoff Election...from Page 1A

There will be no in-person voting Christmas Eve, Christmas Day or New Year's Day, as the courthouse will be closed for those weekday holidays, and there will be no Saturday voting this election.

Voters will encounter a slight procedural change upon entering the early voting area next week, with the Sheriff's Office conducting weapons screening via metal detector.

State law says that, excepting qualified personnel, no weapons are allowed inside the courthouse, and firearms specifically are not allowed within 150 feet of any polling place.

Though there have been no threats or reason to think people will bring weapons to vote, the Sheriff's Office believes the added security will put more people at ease over the three weeks of early voting, especially given the contentious nature surrounding the runoff elections.

Last week, the Union County Board of Elections joined the rest of the state in completing a final recount of the presidential contest between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, coming up with the same total of ballots for the third time in a row, including Election Day.

Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger certified the statewide results of the election on Friday, Nov. 20, an act that officially pledged Georgia's 16 presidential electors to Biden.

Following certification of the Nov. 3 General Election race, due to Biden's 0.26% margin of victory over Trump, the president was able to request a machine recount, which occurred locally on Monday, Nov. 30.

It was the second

statewide presidential race recount since the General Election, the first being a by-hand audit that ran Nov. 13-18, with all counts reflecting a Biden win in Georgia.

Trump is still waging multiple legal battles in several states, including Georgia, and it remains to be seen whether he will be successful in overturning Biden's apparent national victory prior to the Electoral College meeting Dec. 14 to decide who will be the next president.

In addition to the contested presidential election, much ballyhoo has been made about the upcoming Senate runoffs, which many people believe will decide the political trajectory of the country for at least the next four years.

Officials with the Registrar's Office are reporting high interest in mail-in ballots for the Jan. 5 runoffs, having already received many applications, with more coming in every day.

Historically, turnout has been low for runoff elections, but with nearly 400 new voter registrations since Nov. 3 and continuing demand for absentee-by-mail ballots, the Registrar's Office believes the Jan. 5, 2021, elections could prove the exception to the rule.

It should be noted that none of the unsolicited mail-in ballot applications people are receiving in their mailboxes are being sent by the Registrar's Office, which only sends them upon request. People receiving multiple applications need only return one to receive a mailed ballot.

The courthouse remains under a judicial order requiring guests to wear face masks,

practice social distancing and submit to temperature checks before entering the building.

People uncomfortable voting in a mask may head to the polls on Election Day, as currently, facial coverings are not being required to vote at precincts, though this is subject to change.

There's also the option of requesting an absentee ballot to mail or drop off at the Registrar's Office in the courthouse.

Absentee ballots are being automatically mailed to voters who informed the Registrar's Office they were elderly or disabled on a previous application, though all others need to apply to get their mail-in absentee ballot for the runoffs.

People may request mail-in absentee ballots by visiting <https://ballotrequest.sos.ga.gov>, calling the local Registrar's Office at 706-439-6016, or swinging by the office at 65 Courthouse Street.

After requesting an absentee ballot, voters can easily track the progress of their ballot – before and after voting – by signing up at <https://georgia.ballottrax.net/voter/>.

Voters can also access the My Voter Page at mvp.sos.ga.gov ahead of the election for information on voter registration status, mail-in application and ballot status, poll location, registration information on file with the county office, sample ballots and more.

Registered voters who will be at least 18 years of age by Election Day are eligible to vote during early voting, though Dec. 7 was the registration deadline for residents looking to participate in the Jan. 5 election.

Vogel Christmas...from Page 1A

like we normally do.

"We will be parking people (near) the Visitor Center and will have a stage set up, and it will be near the road there. We will be asking people to stay in their cars as much as possible. We got a transmitter, and we will be transmitting our program through the radio in the car.

"You can bring a chair and sit outside the car, but we are just trying to keep people from gathering in large groups."

Though the event will primarily take place near the entrance to the park instead of at the big tree, the programming itself will be like in recent years, with guests still enjoying live music by Justin Terry and other artists, and still getting goodies for attending.

There will be a drive-thru component of the event called "Joy Land," wherein volunteers in tents and kiosks will encircle the usual ballfield meeting place to allow people to grab some

hot cider and cocoa, cookies, a children's surprise gift and more, all from the comfort of their cars.

"We will have a welcome station up there and everything will be prepackaged," Hill said. "People will go through the campground and out the other side, and the tree will be lit where it usually is, and Santa will be right there.

"We have a children's tent that will give kids little crafts that they can do when they get home. Also this year, a motorcycle group will be giving bottled water with scripture. That is kind of how it is going to go until around 8 p.m. We are going to try to do the best we can."

As usual, the event will feature gift collections for the Union County Sheriff's Office Give-A-Gift for Christmas program, which benefits children ages 1 to 12. Attendees looking to donate gifts should bring new and unwrapped

presents, excluding weapons and their toy counterparts.

"We usually have a pretty good turnout for that, and we are glad to keep it going," Hill said before turning to the broader support for the tree lighting. "This year, we actually have 14 churches helping us out with everything, eight in our county and five outside of the county.

"Things like this are important because we work together as churches, and we get to present as much as we can to our county and help in any way we can. It is what Christmas is about for us; we love being there for the community and those that come."

Festivities will begin at 4 p.m. and run until around 8 p.m., with the main Christmas Program kicking off at 5 p.m., and the "Joy Land" drive-thru taking place at 6:30 p.m. Cost of entry is the \$5 parking fee to get into the park.