

Happy New Year 2021

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Local vaccinations against COVID-19 begin in earnest

By Shawn Jarrard
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It appeared to the North Georgia medical community last week that Santa had come early, as hundreds of Moderna COVID-19 vaccine doses began arriving just days before Christmas.

And with more than 300,000 Americans already having died with the disease in 2020, hopefully, the vaccine will start to have a protective effect against COVID-19 in these and other communities as soon as possible.

The first vaccines were administered Wednesday, Dec. 23, at the Union County Health Department, Synergy Health in Hiwassee, and at

Union General Health System, including its two hospitals in Union and Towns counties.

Chatuge Regional Nursing Home staff and residents also began vaccinations that Wednesday, with shots being administered to Union County Nursing Home staff and residents on Christmas Eve.

Additionally, the Towns County Health Department received doses last week, and moving forward, the vaccine will be given in phases, starting with health care workers and long-term care residents before expanding to others and the general public as vaccine supplies increase.

After demonstrating 95% effectiveness, the Moderna

vaccine received emergency use authorization from the Food and Drug Administration on Dec. 18, becoming only the second EUA-approved COVID-19 vaccine behind Pfizer-BioNTech's offering.

Over at the Union County Health Department, to celebrate having received their doses the day before, Office Manager Glenda McGill and Nurse Tiffany Zimmerman organized a last-minute drive-thru vaccination for Wednesday morning, inoculating 20 area health care providers.

McGill, who got her shot Wednesday, and Zimmerman are relieved to be able to offer the vaccine as peace of mind for frontline medical workers who are at greater risk both

of personal exposure and potentially passing the infection on to vulnerable people.

Certified Medical Assistant Lisa Loudermilk was vaccinated during the drive-thru clinic, and she said having access to the vaccine means the world to many health care workers who "see COVID coming in every day."

"And we want our patients to know that this vaccine is safe to take, so when they come and ask us, we can say, yes, we've had it, so it's safe to take," Loudermilk said.

The Health Department will continue this week giving the Moderna vaccine, which is administered in two doses 28

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Dr. Kevin Davis of Union General Women's Health not only waited in line to vote Dec. 23 but also lined up to receive his COVID-19 vaccine at the hospital. Pictured here with Infection Control Nurse Rhonda Colwell. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Snow brings 'White Christmas' to North Georgia Mountains

By Shawn Jarrard
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Being the evening of Christmas Eve, it was perhaps the best-case scenario for snow - fewer people out and about, kids home from school, and just in time to make a White Christmas.

Everywhere one looked in Union County was a picturesque scene, with snow gently blanketing the area to provide pristine views in an already naturally pristine countryside.

Unfortunately, the roughly 3 inches of snow was preceded by nearly 2 inches of rain, so when temperatures dropped to 21 degrees overnight, the fluffy white stuff was thoroughly unrelaid with a hard layer of ice.

This made for nearly undrivable road conditions Christmas Eve night and the early part of Christmas Day,



The City of Blairsville's Nativity Scene got a snowy backdrop for Christmas, as winter weather moved in Dec. 24.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

which saw a bit more snowfall in the morning and four-wheel drive vehicles making their way around town Friday.

Good thing was, being Christmas, most people had the

holiday off anyway and didn't need to drive, so fewer people got stuck out on the roads than would have been expected other times of the winter.

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Three local first responders receive SAR service awards

By Shawn Jarrard
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The Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter Sons of the American Revolution presented three dedicated first responders with commendations during the December county meeting, which was attended by friends and loved ones of those receiving awards.

Union General Paramedic Frank Lowery received the Emergency Medical Services Award and Murray King Award; Fire Lt. Brent Long received the Fire Safety Commendation Award; and Sheriff's Lt. Leon James received the Law Enforcement Commendation Medal.

Sid Turner serves as vice president of the Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter SAR, and he was delighted to be able to present the awards in Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris' Dec. 17 regular meeting.



On behalf of the Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter Sons of the American Revolution, Kendra King presented Paramedic Frank Lowery with the memorial Murray King Award at the Union County Courthouse Dec. 17. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

The Emergency Medical Services Award is given "in recognition of dedication to the preservation of life and health under emergency conditions and/or performing beyond the duties normally called for

within the Emergency Medical Services profession."

EMS Director Wesley Rogers nominated Lowery for the award, dubbing him "2020 Paramedic of the Year" and

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Early in-person voting ends Thursday, Dec. 31



Dec. 31 will be the last day of early in-person voting.

Elections officials are asking that people make every attempt to vote early, as the possibility of bad winter weather may impact the electorate's ability to make it to the polls on Jan. 5 Election Day.

As previously reported, Union County voters will encounter a slight procedural change upon entering the early voting area this election, 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 prohibited 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 during early voting, especially given the contentious nature surrounding the runoff elections.

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 a mailed ballot, voters can track the progress of their ballot - before and after voting - by signing up at https://georgia.ballottrax.net/voter/. Those who receive an absentee ballot but decide to vote in person should bring their mailed ballot to the polls for canceling.

Voters can also access See Early Voting, Page 2A

Last chance to see area Christmas light shows



The Gwynn Family's special synchronized Christmas Light Show will host its last viewings this week before wrapping up Jan. 1, so be sure to check the show out on Birch Cane Drive. Photo/Facebook

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

While the area did not have all the usual Christmas events due to COVID-19, several people in the community have worked hard this season to provide lighting experiences for families wanting to see something for Christmas.

Andy Gwynn of Birch Cane Drive in Blairsville has a synchronized Christmas Light Show that has been going the entire month, likely seen by thousands of people so far.

"It started when my now oldest child was 2, and she

loved flashing and blinking lights, so it kind of grew from there," Gwynn said. "This year was a little quicker, we didn't really put up anything new, but maybe five days or six days to get everything on the house."

"The difficult part is all of the songs and the software that is behind it. You kind of start working on that in February to have everything planned. Everything is automated, and people have been loving it."

"I don't know how many people come through, but I know that we have given over 1,000 candy canes just based off what we have bought."

The Gwynn Light Show lasts around 20 minutes and is followed by another light show hosted across the street by the Hyde Family.

With the two-in-one package, people like Sandra Gomez of Florida are happy to bring their families to watch the show, which incorporates modern music with other festive soundtracks.

"It is so hard to find synchronized light shows around here," Gomez said. "This is a really cool show, and the kids have really loved it. I didn't expect some of the songs." See Christmas Lights, Page 2A

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Runoff Election Results will be available Jan. 6 at nganews.com and on our Facebook Page