

# Vaccinations...from Page 1A

days apart, so everyone who receives the vaccine will need to return for a booster.

Union General Health System vaccinated 280 people between Dec. 23 and Dec. 24, including 175 employees of its hospitals and nursing homes in Union and Towns, 71 residents at Union County Nursing Home and 34 residents at Chatuge Regional Nursing Home.

Dr. Elizabeth Wiles was the first to be vaccinated at Union General Hospital on Wednesday, and she said the occasion marked an important milestone in the pandemic.

"This allows us to feel like we are moving forward and making progress in ending the significant deaths and number of cases in the community," Wiles said. "Even after the vaccine, we are still going to need to wear masks and protect ourselves with social distancing, but this is a step in the right direction."

In-house vaccination clinics will continue for the Health System this week, though vaccines are not currently being mandated for employees, according to Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett, who received a shot herself Dec. 23.

"I hope this is the start of healing our little community and doing our part to get rid of this virus," Barnett said.

There are several side effects associated with the vaccine, though aside from some injection site soreness, which is typical of vaccinations, at press time, the newspaper was unaware of any adverse side effects from vaccines delivered locally last week.

These COVID-19 vaccines are entering into uncharted scientific territory as first-of-their kind prophylactics. All other vaccines use killed or weakened pathogen to help people's bodies simulate low-level infections to build immunity; this is not so with COVID.

COVID vaccines are mRNA vaccines that don't actually contain any COVID-19 virus. The technology has been around for a while, but this is the first mRNA vaccine to be used in humans.

Basically, these new vaccines contain genetic instructions called messenger RNA. When injected, the mRNA uses people's own cells to create part of the virus' structure called the spike protein, thereby giving the body something to develop antibodies against.

Dr. Samuel L. Church of Synergy Health Inc. in Towns County said the vaccine appears to be both safe and effective, and that people don't have to worry about such a technology rewriting their DNA or anything like that.

But Church doesn't just talk the talk – he received the vaccine himself last Wednesday, and he's been closely following vaccine development as part of his official duties with the American Medical Association's national efforts to standardize vaccine dose tracking.

He acknowledges the risks of a new type of vaccine being used for the first time in an emergency setting, but he also points out that, just as the scientific community doesn't know the long-term effects of such a vaccine, it also doesn't know the long-term effects of COVID-19.

"The unknowns are far outweighed by the risks that we know of the virus itself," Church said. "My team and I have been a part of this conversation for a long time, and we are showing our trust in the process and the vaccines, and from a public health perspective as well."

Synergy Health has been designated a mass vaccine provider, which will enable Church and his team to vaccinate everyone who wants it as more stock comes online.

He understands that some people may be hesitant to get the vaccine. However, he remains optimistic that many people will choose to do so as it becomes more widely available, especially older Americans who are more vulnerable to death and hospitalization.

"Even if you don't want to get vaccinated, the more



Union General Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett received her vaccine from Infection Control Nurse Rhonda Colwell Dec. 23. Barnett said the vaccines represent "hope for me as a health care provider." Photo by Shawn Jarrard



Nurse Tiffany Zimmerman vaccinated Nurse Stacie Nelson in the Health Department's drive-thru clinic Dec. 23. After getting her shot, Nelson said, "It feels like we may finally start to see an end to this and some control." Photo by Shawn Jarrard



Union County Nursing Home resident Pat Booth got her COVID vaccine from Nurse Janet Tanner on Christmas Eve. Photo/Submitted

of the community that gets vaccinated, the better off the rest of us are," Church said. "The more we can get vaccinated early on, the better our whole community is."

Of course, a truly safe and effective vaccine being available for universal distribution would mean that it's just a matter of time before this COVID nightmare is over, and Church is hopeful that such a time is upon us.

"This is surreal, having to wear these masks even dealing with close family members," Church said of COVID-19. "I see this vaccine as the beginning of the end of this craziness, and

kind of an emancipation from the shackles of this virus. So, I'm excited about that."

For more information on Georgia's vaccine distribution plan, which will likely feature a firmer timeline in the coming weeks, visit <https://dph.georgia.gov/covid-vaccine>. There, people will find an active counter showing how many vaccines have been administered statewide to date.

Appointment-only COVID testing is still available at the local Health Department Monday through Friday from 8-9 a.m., so call 1-888-426-5073 to schedule an appointment.

# Christmas Lights...from Page 1A



The Buchanan Family Lights, which will run through Jan. 2, 2021, received some snow on Scataway Road in Hiawassee this year. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

to be so new and modern, but it was a nice pace.

"It is a great thing to do with your family and kids, and I think it is something that people really need to come see. It is two shows in one, and it is free – can't beat that."

A schedule can be found on the Gwynn's Christmas Light Show Facebook page, with the final show being held on Friday, Jan 1.

"Tune your car radio to 91.9 FM," according to Facebook. "Address is 121 Birch Cane Drive, Blairsville, GA 30512. Merry Christmas!"

Another homegrown area light show people have come to love over the years takes place on Scataway Road in Hiawassee.

The Buchanan Family has welcomed thousands of guests over the years to see their massive collection of Christmas lights. Complete with music and free candy canes, the display has been a passion project of Robert Buchanan's for more than 30 years.

"It seems like it has been the best year we have ever had," Buchanan said. "Every night it seems like there are

cars lined up outside, and we have given away thousands of candy canes, so we are thankful that people love our lights and enjoy coming to see them. We love doing it."

The event draws folks from all over the area, people like Amy Henderson of Rabun County, who during a recent trip to the display was in awe of Buchanan's effort.

"These lights are amazing," Henderson said. "We heard about them from a friend

of ours and drove out here to see what they are all about.

"I have never seen so many lights packed into one spot, and it is just amazing. It takes a true passion to do something like this for people in the community, and people like this make me love Christmas."

The Buchanan Family Lights run nightly until around 10-10:30 p.m., with the last night being Saturday, Jan. 2.

# Early Voting...from Page 1A

the My Voter Page at [mvp.sos.ga.gov](http://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 runoff elections.

Election Day is Tuesday, Jan. 5, 2021, from 7 a.m. to 7

p.m. On Election Day, voters should report to one of the 11 pre-assigned Union County voting precincts: Ivy Log, Dooly, Gum Log, Blairsville, Pat Colwell, Trackrock, Coosa, Jones Creek, Owl Town, Choestoe and Suches.

People are not required to bring their mailed precinct cards, but they must show a valid photo ID to vote.

Voters will want to keep in mind that photography inside polling places is expressly prohibited, including at early voting locations and at precincts on Election Day.