



SunSentinel LOCAL

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CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Mixed emotions surround vaccine

Doctors and nurses express hesitation, excitement as state prepares rollout

By Lisa J. Huriash
South Florida Sun Sentinel

Some of South Florida's doctors and nurses say they're eager to be the first to be inoculated — while others remain wary of the COVID-19 vaccine and may opt out of taking it.

Their mixed responses come just days before Florida's front-line medical workers begin rolling up their sleeves for the state's first round of COVID-19 vaccinations. The tens of thousands of vaccinations all will be on a voluntary basis, including at Memorial Regional Hospital in Hollywood and Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami.

At Memorial, flu shots are mandatory, but COVID-19 vaccination is voluntary, even with those who come into contact with COVID-19 patients daily.

Dr. Michael Estreicher, an emergency medicine physician at Memorial Hospital Pembroke, which has about 50 COVID-19 patients, says he hasn't committed yet to the COVID vaccine. "I'm still evaluating the data for myself and pending a decision," he said.

And Dr. David Woolsey, an emergency room physician at Jackson, said some of his colleagues are struggling with the decision: "It's not an easy call for a lot of people."

He said he's all in though, especially because he's seeing the

uptick in infections, and his high level of exposure.

"It really boils down to figuring out risk and benefit. But you always wonder about side effects from a new medication or any kind of new treatment. We have an expression: 'You'd rather not be the first person or last person to prescribe a new treatment.' But there are times the new treatment is such a dramatic breakthrough you tend to be closer to the first than the last."

Memorial Regional, Jackson Memorial and three other hospitals in Florida plan to start administering Pfizer's vaccine as early as next week, pending the government's approval. Jackson is expecting its vaccines Sunday night and

would begin administering them Monday.

The health care workers eligible for the vaccine are the very first people who come into contact with the most sick coronavirus patients, so they've been prioritized to be vaccinated — months before the vaccines are rolled out to the public.

There is hesitancy to take it among some medical professionals. Martha Baker, the president of a healthcare worker's union at Jackson Memorial, said doctors and nurses were asked three things: whether they want to take the vaccine immediately, wait a while before taking it or not take it at all. She said the majority of people who answered — especially those who are "swimming

in COVID" from frequent contact with patients — replied they would want to take the vaccine now.

That's because they know the pandemic will "get worse before it gets better," she said.

Polling hospital workers

According to Jackson's spokeswoman, 5,906 people answered the poll, which is about half of their workforce. More than 49% said they will get the vaccine; almost 36% said they will consider it for a future round, and almost 15% said no.

Baker said the issues for those

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White House report urges acts DeSantis doesn't back

By Eileen Kelley
South Florida Sun Sentinel

The White House Coronavirus Task Force is urging state leaders to take strong measures to stem the surge of the virus including that there be no indoor gatherings of people outside of those in immediate households.

Florida is among the states being asked to step up its efforts, efforts — such as shutting down bars and indoor dining — that run contrary to what Gov. Ron DeSantis has espoused.

The Dec. 6 report was obtained by The Center for Public Integrity. Such reports are generated weekly by a 26-person panel that is chaired

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PALM BEACH COUNTY

Trump loyalist wins another term as GOP chairman

By Anthony Man
South Florida Sun Sentinel

Michael Barnett, chairman of the Palm Beach County Republican Party, is a loyal supporter of Donald Trump — but isn't ready to welcome him to post-presidential life in Palm Beach.

Not yet, anyway. "I'd rather have him in D.C. in the White House," Barnett said. "I firmly believe he won the election."

Joe Biden's inauguration as the 46th president is scheduled for Jan. 20. At that point, Trump is widely expected to take up residence at his Mar-a-Lago Club in Palm Beach.

Barnett, who was over-

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Sounds of South America

Carlos Tomati and Michelle Spinelli with Bossa Fusion Duo perform at the ninth annual Brazilian Festival at Huizenga Park in Fort Lauderdale on Saturday. This year's festival is much smaller than years past due to COVID-19. Tickets must be acquired in advance, and attendance is extremely limited. There are temperature checks, and mandatory use of masks are required prior to entry. MIKE STOCKER/SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL

Festival of the Arts Boca will be free next year



South Florida jazz flutist Nestor Torres, clockwise from top left, Grammy-winning violinist James Ehnes, Boca Raton native and Metropolitan Opera soprano Nadine Sierra and composer Constantine Kitsopoulos will perform at the 2021 Festival of the Arts Boca, returning March 6 through 14. FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS BOCA/COURTESY

By Phillip Valys
South Florida Sun Sentinel

For the first time in its 15-year history, the 2021 Festival of the Arts Boca will be free when it returns March 6 through 14, with an all-virtual and abbreviated bill of live music, authors and ideas.

In the long-ago, prepandemic era of 2019, of course, this would be unthinkable. Visitors typically paid for ticketed performances (remember those?) scheduled at the festival's longtime home, Mizner Park Amphitheater. Instead, this year's bash will be free with advance registration on the festival's website, FestivalBoca.org, and zero concerts will be staged at Mizner Park.

Kicking off March 6 with a concert by Boca Raton native and Metropolitan Opera soprano Nadine Sierra, the festival will be topped by shows from Grammy-winning violinist James Ehnes (March 7) and South Florida jazz flutist Nestor Torres (March 14).

All performances will take place without audiences at venues all over Boca Raton, including the Boca Raton Airport, Florida Atlantic University and Boca Raton Resort and Club.

Advance registration for the festival will open in January at FestivalBoca.org, although organizers are still finalizing a specific date. Once registered, festivalgoers

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Maternity Program

Boca

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can stream programs live on the day of each performance, but no replays will be available.

The 15th annual spring bash also will honor festival co-founder Charlie Siemon, who died Sept. 24 and has been credited with bringing the stylish Mizner Park plaza to Boca, says Joanna Marie Kaye, the festival's new executive

director, in a statement. "Charlie would have been thrilled to see that paradoxically, we have the opportunity to reach our biggest audience ever in 2021 with all of our events filmed and broadcast worldwide," Kaye says.

Other highlights include a March 13 Festival of the Arts Boca All-Stars salon by conductor Constantine Kitsopoulos and orchestra members. On the literary-minded front, author and retired

four-star U.S. Admiral James Stavridis will deliver a talk on leadership at 7 p.m. March 8. The former NATO Supreme Allied Commander has earned more than 50 medals over his 37-year military career. Next, author Bruce Feiler will discuss his New York Times bestseller "Life Is In the Transitions: Mastering Change at Any Age," a collection of stories about living life more purposefully, at 7 p.m. March 9.

Science journalist Sonia Shah will wrap the authors-and-ideas series with a 7 p.m. March 11 talk on climate change and her book, "The Next Great Migration: The Beauty and Terror of Life on the Move."

The 2021 Festival of the Arts Boca will take place March 6 to 14. All performances are free with advance registration via FestivalBoca.org. Call 561-571-5270.

COVID-19 IN FLORIDA

10,577 new cases and 71 more deaths

By **Aric Chokey and Kathy Laskowski**
South Florida Sun Sentinel

Florida reported 10,577 new coronavirus cases on Saturday and another 71 new resident deaths linked to COVID-19. The state has now reported 1,116,973 cases since the pandemic began.

South Florida

Palm Beach County: 556 additional cases and no additional deaths. The county now has 72,247 confirmed cases and 1,793 deaths, including 27 non-residents.

Broward County: 917 additional cases and 2 more deaths. Broward has a known total of 119,429 cases and 1,760 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic. The death tally includes 30 non-residents.

Miami-Dade County: 2,059 additional cases and 6 new deaths. The county now has 255,462 confirmed cases and 3,988 deaths, including 23 non-residents.

Testing and positivity

Public health experts say the virus is considered under control when the COVID-19 test positivity rate is under 5%. But since Oct. 29, Florida has exceeded 5% in its widely publicized calculation for assessing the rate for testing of residents.

The state reported a daily positivity rate of 7.89% on Saturday, up from 7.88% the day before. This method of calculating positivity counts new infections only, but also counts repeat negative tests, which skews the figure downward.

According to the state, the new reported case numbers

reflect the results of 132,615 COVID-19 tests of Florida residents received from labs in the past day, down from 144,884 results reported the day before.

Palm Beach County: Test results for 8,711 residents were reported Saturday, leading to a daily positivity rate of 6.31%. That's down from 7.85% the previous day.

Broward County: Test results for 13,588 residents were reported Saturday, leading to a daily positivity rate of 6.86%. That's up from 6.37% the previous day.

Miami-Dade County: Test results for 25,077 residents were reported Saturday, leading to a daily positivity rate of 8.17%. That's up from 7.91% the previous day.

Deaths

The state's pandemic data report shows a total of 19,785 Floridians have died from COVID-19. In addition, 264 non-residents have died after contracting the virus. Most of the fatalities reported Saturday happened over several weeks but were just confirmed in the past day.

Hospitalizations

As of Saturday, there were 4,624 people hospitalized in Florida with a primary diagnosis of COVID-19, according to the state Agency for Health Care Administration.

In South Florida, Broward County reported 430, Palm Beach County had 277 and Miami-Dade had 812.

Hospitalizations hit a peak in late July of about 9,500 patients statewide, then dipped as low as 2,011 on Oct. 19. The numbers steadily increased throughout November and December.

Barnett

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whelmingly reelected as chairman of the county party this week, is among many Republican leaders who are going along with Trump's claims that he actually won reelection on Nov. 3.

"We want President Trump to know we still support him. Until he concedes — if he concedes — so be it. But until that point, we're still firmly behind him," Barnett said. "We'll follow his lead."

Biden won 306 electoral votes — the same number Trump won in 2016 and proclaimed a "massive landslide." This year, Trump has asserted that voter fraud is the only way Biden could have won. Courts and election officials from both parties have said that's not true, but few elected officials and leaders in the Trump-dominated party have disagreed publicly with him.

Barnett has plenty of company among Florida Republican leaders in supporting Trump's assertions, but he's unusual in another way: He was an early supporter of Trump's 2016 presidential candidacy at a time when many Florida party activists were supporting one of the state's favorite sons — former Gov. Jeb Bush or U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio — for the party's nomination.

Only 28.6% of Palm Beach County's registered voters are Republicans, far

less than the Democrats' 42%.

But Trump did relatively well this year in the overwhelmingly Democratic county. Biden won the county, 56% to 43.2%, as Trump was winning Florida with 51.2% of the statewide vote.

But that doesn't give the full picture. Trump received 28.7% more votes in Palm Beach County than he did in 2016 — a more significant increase than his 22.8% improvement statewide.

Biden also received more votes in 2020 than Hillary Clinton did in 2016, but his Palm Beach County performance was just 15.7% better than Clinton's. Biden's improvement was lower in Palm Beach County than statewide.

In Palm Beach County, a Republican is highly unlikely to win countywide. But in overwhelmingly Democratic South Florida, there's another measure of success. In statewide elections, the Republican objective in South Florida isn't to win the county, it's to produce enough votes to hold down the size of the Democratic advantage.

Locally, success is more elusive for Republicans. The countywide elected offices are all held by Democrats. Six of the seven county commissioners are Democrats (in the mid-2000s, four of the seven were Republicans). Eight of the 11 members of the state Legislature who live in Palm Beach County

are Democrats.

"Local races gave us trouble," Barnett said. "We are outnumbered by Democrats, and that kind of hurts us in local races. But we are a huge county by population. We have a lot of Republicans and we help turn out those votes [for statewide candidates]."

Barnett and the other three party officers were first elected in 2014. They were reelected Wednesday night by Republican committeewomen and committeemen elected by precinct throughout the county.

The Republicans held an in-person election, unlike the Democrats who conducted their leadership contests virtually because of the coronavirus pandemic. That mirrored the pattern of the 2020 political season, during which Democrats pulled back much of their in-person voter contacts until the end.

Republicans continued in-person voter contacts, and voter registration efforts, something Barnett said paid off on Election Day.

Barnett received 116 votes to 35 for Derek Schwartz.

In 2018, Schwartz had announced his candidacy against U.S. Rep. Lois Frankel, D-West Palm Beach. But less than 24 hours before the deadline for candidates to qualify, he said he wouldn't run after all. Frankel was returned to office automatically because there wasn't

anyone challenging her.

Besides Barnett, Vice Chairwoman Tami Donnally, Secretary Cheryl Mullings, and Treasurer Jane Pike were reelected.

Barnett said his group is a "strong, unified team" that has one goal: winning elections. Besides organizing voter outreach efforts, he said events such as the annual Lincoln Day Dinner at Mar-a-Lago help raise lots of money that pays for election year activities such as renting offices.

Leading up to the 2022 elections for governor and U.S. Senate, Barnett said the party would continue extensive voter registration efforts. And he wants to restore Republicans' trust in Florida's vote-by-mail system.

Republicans dominated mail voting in Florida — until this year when Trump said voting by mail was unreliable and rife with fraud. After months of attacks on the concept, he declared that the Florida system worked well. By that point, some Florida Republicans lost faith in the system.

"We have to do better at convincing our base that Palm Beach County and Florida gets it right when it comes to vote-by-mail," he said. "It was really difficult for us and the state party and the [Trump] campaign to convince some Trump supporters."

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