

Towns County Herald

Legal Organ of Towns County

www.townscountyherald.net

Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1928

75 Cents

Publication Number 635540 Volume 93 Number 13

Wednesday, January 26, 2022

Sheriff Henderson graduates from sheriff-elect training

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Completing sheriff-elect training as a new sheriff is more than just a requirement of Georgia law – it's also a rite of passage, one that, for Towns County Sheriff Ken Henderson, was more than a year in the making due to COVID-19. Sheriff-Elect Training took place in several locations over the past year or so, starting at Callaway Gardens and going to Savannah, then to Atlanta, where Henderson finished instruction and graduated on Jan. 18 at the Renaissance Atlanta Waverly Hotel & Convention Center.

The training, which was broken up into several different sessions throughout 2021, consisted of "mandates partic-

ular to the Office of the Sheriff, including law enforcement and jail management," according to the Towns County Sheriff's Office Facebook page.

Usually, the training takes about six weeks to complete with around 120 hours' worth of classes, though Henderson finished about a year later than he would have been able to otherwise in pre-pandemic times.

And while COVID postponed his training – Henderson was elected sheriff in November 2020 – he never wavered in upholding his oath of office by faithfully protecting and serving the people of Towns County.

"Sheriff Henderson would like to personally thank the citizens of Towns County for giving him the opportunity to be your sheriff," the Face-

book post continues. "(He) is fully committed to always staying abreast of any other training opportunities as they become available to better perform his duties to the highest level of professionalism."

Now that he has completed his training, Henderson looks forward to advancing his already considerable track record.

In his first year, Henderson conducted a total image overhaul for the department with new uniforms and black and white cruisers; established regular road safety checks; doubled the amount of deputy training from the minimum 20 hours to 40 hours; created a K-9 drug unit; improved public outreach with a new website and social media presence; confiscated more than two

See Sheriff Henderson, Page 8A



L-R: Turner County Sheriff Andy Hester, Gov. Brian Kemp, Sheriff Ken Henderson and Georgia Sheriffs' Association Executive Director J. Terry Norris during last week's Sheriff-Elect Training Graduation in Atlanta. Photo/Facebook

Health Board reviews COVID stats in teleconference

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Out of an abundance of caution during the current COVID-19 surge, the Towns County Board of Health held its quarterly meeting via teleconference on Thursday, Jan. 20, to discuss environmental, nursing and financial reports as well as matters of COVID and vaccinations.

"Towns County has vaccinated 56% of residents with one dose, and 52% are fully vaccinated (against COVID-19)," said County Nurse Manager Lisa Burks. "And we continue to vaccinate daily with Pfizer, Moderna and J&J."

"We also continue to go offsite and vaccinate employees at Blue Ridge Mountain EMC and homebound patients within our community."

Burks also talked about recent immunization audits for Towns County Schools and Eastgate Life Academy. Audits ensure students are acquiring state-required immunizations, such as vaccines for diphtheria, hepatitis A and B, measles, polio etc. COVID vaccines are not currently required.

"Towns County initial visit was 83% compliant with follow-up visit increasing to 88%, while Eastgate was 100% compliant," Burks said. "And we are aiming to com-

plete scoliosis screenings for Towns County Middle School by March 31."

District 2 Public Health Director Dr. Zachary Taylor gave new updates regarding COVID-19.

"(As of Jan. 20), Towns County has had 1,795 cases reported total, and 152 cases reported within the past two weeks, and 32.4% of those tested have been positive," he said. "We have been seeing a lot of transmission in Towns County as we have across the state of Georgia."

"However, it does appear that cases are starting to go down in the Metro Atlanta area where the surge started, so I believe we can expect to see cases start to go down in our area within the next week or two."

"I want to reiterate on some facts pertaining to vaccination that (Burks) provided earlier. The 56% of Towns County patients that have received one dose compares to 62% overall in Georgia. The 52% that are fully vaccinated compares to 54% in Georgia overall, and 25% have received a booster shot compared to 19% overall in Georgia."

"Towns County is better vaccinated than the other counties around it, however, it is slightly lower than the state of Georgia overall."

Environmental Health



Dr. Zachary Taylor
District 2 Public Health

Manager Tony Berrong reported that, in the last quarter of 2021, "there were 32 new septic permits, three additions and four repairs."

"We also had 53 food service, 14 tourists accommodation facilities, one water sample, two rabies investigations with zero positive cases," he said.

District Administrator Lisa Hocker discussed Towns County Health Department financials, saying that, "as of the end of December 2021, the operating fund balance was at \$479,752, and that is up 23% as of the last fiscal year."

"Other revenues were up by \$28,086 primarily due to an increase in Medicare services,"

See Health Board, Page 8A

Towns Fire & Rescue knocks down two home blazes

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Towns County Fire & Rescue extinguished two structure fires last week, both of which resulted in complete destruction of the homes involved but no injuries or losses of life.

Around 7:30 a.m. on Sunday, Jan. 16, Engine 1 and Tanker 1 responded to a camper-like home that was ablaze on Upper Bell Creek Road across from Bell Scene Baptist Church, Fire Chief Harold Copeland said.

It was a particularly challenging fire to fight, as it took place the morning of the recent winter storm that caused high wind conditions, icy roadways and a couple inches of snow to drop in the county.

"Any time there's a combo of wind and fire, it's one of the biggest challenges a firefighter can face," Chief Copeland said.

Compounding the inclement weather difficulty was the fact that, based on information provided by family members of the home's resident, firefighters were operating under the assumption that the resident may have still been inside the home, which was fully involved in fire.

After having the fire



Towns County firefighters working to put out this Jan. 16 house fire on Upper Bell Creek Road across from Bell Scene Baptist Church. Photo/Submitted

down, firefighters proceeded to undertake an extensive search of the structure that burned to the ground, digging through the wreckage of the home in an attempt to locate the resident.

Fortunately, the resident was discovered to have been with a friend in another part of town, so firefighters were able to end their search and continue making sure that the fire stayed out.

Though it is believed to have been accidental in nature, the cause of the fire was de-

termined at press time.

Then around 6 a.m. on Thursday, Jan. 20, the Fire Department responded to a Brad Road trailer home blaze called into 911 by a passing motorist on 75 South.

Engine 1, Tanker 1 and Engine 4 arrived to find the home fully involved in flames, and firefighters spent the better part of four hours completely extinguishing the fire, which required a "lengthy overhaul" because the structure had collapsed on itself.

See Home Blazes, Page 8A

Board of Elections consolidates Macedonia, Hiawassee Precincts



In last month's called Board of Elections meeting, Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw presented his concerns about Election Day difficulties caused by upcoming courthouse construction.

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

In a called meeting last month, the Towns County Board of Elections consolidated the Macedonia Precinct with the Hiawassee Precinct, officially reducing Towns County to two precincts for Election Day voting: Hiawassee and Young Harris.

As background, state election laws stipulate that voting precincts must always be staffed with three poll managers "who are typically more

experienced than clerks," that is, poll workers, Elections Board Chair Dr. Janet Oliva said previously.

"Unfortunately, the Towns County Board of Elections has experienced a significant loss in experienced managers this year through death, retirements and resignations (including some as a result of safety concerns over COVID)," Oliva said in the September 2021 county meeting.

Additionally, the Secretary of State's Office is no longer providing county elections offices with equipment tech-

Photo by Mark Smith

tricians trained by Dominion Voting Systems to facilitate elections.

"Therefore, all elections responsibilities, including troubleshooting any equipment problems or issues at each precinct, and managing Election Day tallying and reporting, must be completed by one of two office staff who have been certified by the state as elections officials," Oliva said.

As such, Oliva said the Towns County Elections Board only has enough experienced and trained managers

See Board of Elections, Page 8A

Local challenges linger as COVID continues statewide decline

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Signs are emerging that the current surge of COVID-19 driven by the omicron variant may be abating, as Georgia and other states in the nation have begun to experience a rapid decline in positivity.

After more than doubling the previous pandemic record for new cases reported in a single day in the first week of January, the statewide seven-day moving average of newly reported cases

has fallen by several thousand over the last couple of weeks.

And while the North Georgia Mountains are facing continued challenges with the latest surge, as cases are still piling up locally, Metro Atlanta has been experiencing big drops in positivity in recent weeks, and this area is likely only a week or two behind that trend.

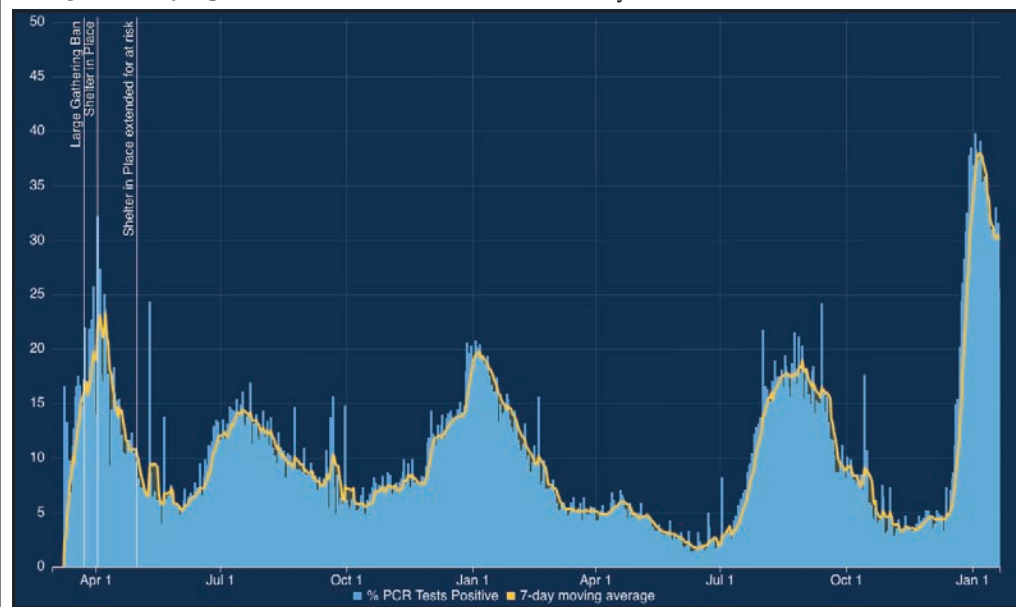
"I think it's still too early to say (if we're headed in the right direction), but it is very encouraging to see the state numbers starting to decline," said Union General Health System

Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett.

Other positive conclusions may be drawn from the current surge, which does not seem to be resulting in the same level of severe illness as witnessed in previous surges, especially compared to the fall delta wave.

Though there are "some very folks that are dying," Barnett said the average length of hospital stay for local COVID

See Local COVID, Page 8A



A snapshot of percent positivity among Georgia residents tested for COVID-19 over the course of the pandemic shows a marked statewide decline currently. Graph taken from https://dph.georgia.gov/covid-19-daily-status-report.

2 Sections 16 Pages
Lake Levels
Blue Ridge 1,668.49
Chatuge 1,917.46
Nottely 1,760.24

Arrests 2A
Chamber 5A
Church 3B
Classifieds 6B
Opinion 4A
Legals 6B
Obits 4B
Sports 6A

SPORTS
BASKETBALL
1/25 vs. Social Circle 5 PM
1/28 vs. Washington Wilkes 5:30 PM
1@9 vs. Tallulah Falls 5 PM

Quilt of Valor Recipient
See page 1B

Courthouse Renovations Request for Proposal
See page 7B

FREE COVID Testing
See page 8B

Home Blazes...from Page 1A



This Brad Road trailer home fire from Jan. 20 is believed to have been accidental in nature.

The cause of this fire is still under investigation, but it is believed to be accidental at this time.

Chief Copeland commends the hard work and dedication of his firefighters, who work tirelessly to ensure that the residents of Towns County receive the best possible response to any number and type of emergencies.

And while the causes of the above structure fires have yet to be resolved, people should be aware that homes are generally more vulnerable to fire during the winter months, as residents utilize various heating sources to warm their homes.

According to the Office of the Insurance and Fire Safety Commissioner, heating

equipment is a leading cause of residential fires in the United States.

Data from the National Fire Prevention Association shows that local fire departments responded to an annual average of 48,530 fires resulting from negligent heater use between 2014 and 2018," Insurance and Fire Safety Commissioner John F. King's office said recently. "These fires resulted in 500 deaths, 1,350 injuries, and \$1.1 billion in property damage.

"In recognition of the risk of heating equipment, Commissioner King asks Georgians to follow the below tips for keeping yourself and your home safe this winter:

"Have your fireplace or wood stove chimney and

Photo by Lowell Nicholson chimney connectors inspected and cleaned at the start of the heating season.

"Do not plug heating equipment into extension cords. This can lead to overheating of the cord, damage to the appliance, and increased risk of fire or electric shock.

"Move anything that can burn (i.e., furniture, bedding, clothing) at least 3 feet from your heater, fireplace or wood stove; 54% of home heating fire deaths were caused by having heating equipment too close to things that can burn.

"Keep your children and pets safely away from your portable or space heater; turn off your portable or space heater before leaving the room; (and) never use your oven to heat your home."

Sheriff Henderson...from Page 1A

dozen pounds of methamphetamine; and much more.

As for 2022, the sheriff said he will continue to make good on his campaign promises, like expanding Neighborhood Watch initiatives in the community, sponsoring cadet programs to increase involvement in the local schools, and conducting mental health training and raising mental health awareness among deputies and jailers.

"I am so honored to serve the people of Towns County," Henderson said, "and with that comes the responsibility of being a professional department, one that's well-trained, one that knows what they're doing when they arrive on the scene.

"I'm very pleased with our first year; we did a lot of things we said we were going to do. We're hoping to continue all that into this year and improve upon the other things that we promised.

"We've improved this department to the point to where we're a very professional department, and we're going to continue to do that and assure the citizens of Towns County that they have a professional Sheriff's Department. We've accomplished a lot in a year, but yet there's a lot to be done."

Sheriff Henderson has enjoyed an extensive career in law enforcement that began

about 38 years ago when he helped to establish the Young Harris College Police Department, where he worked for decades as police chief.

In his time as a Peace Officer, he has worked simultaneously for various other agencies, including for the Towns and Union County Sheriff's Offices, and for the McCaysville Police Department. And all that experience came with plenty of training over the years.

"From the time I went to work in law enforcement, I have always said that training is key to being a successful officer and being a professional officer," Henderson said. "My thing is 'train, train, train,' because you can never get enough training in this business.

"If someone wants to become a good law enforcement officer that serves the citizens well, then that's going to be a well-trained officer that knows what he's doing."

Also important to the sheriff is fostering good working relationships with other area agencies, thereby ensuring his department can coordinate with larger first responder efforts for situations requiring collaboration among multiple emergency services, like the Fire Department and EMS.

"We're ongoing in training with all the public safety folks in Towns County, work-

ing active shooter-type situations and response," Henderson said. "There's a lot of stuff that comes with that, and we're training with all of our counterparts.

"And we're going to continue to do that so that we are as best prepared as we can be in the event that we have to respond to something of that nature. We're going to continue to train and work with all law enforcement and work with all of our surrounding agencies to pull together as one.

"If everybody is trained and prepared as to what their role is, when we get there, then we're going to know what we're responsible for doing. So, being on the same page, working together, and knowing what we're going to do - we're going to be better prepared to serve the people and possibly save lives.

"It's just a must - you have got to work together to make this happen. And I can't say enough about all the factions here, how helpful and how cooperative they've been, and how this thing has gone so well with everybody working together.

"That's what it's about; we share the same common goal of protecting and serving the citizens of Towns County."

For more information, visit <https://www.townscountysheriff.org/>.

Board of Elections...from Page 1A

to staff two polling places effectively, hence the need for consolidation.

No formal consolidation objections were lodged from the public, but prior to the Dec. 15 vote, Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw and County Attorney Robb Kiker each made presentations regarding the potential postponement of consolidation.

Speaking first, Bradshaw said he realized, just the day before, that when the renovation of the courthouse begins later this year as expected, a safety/security fence will be temporarily put in place to surround the building and areas around the courthouse.

The upshot is the access drive at the courthouse and much of the existing parking space will be blocked, which he said may cause problems for the Hiwassee Precinct during upcoming elections, even without the consolidation of the Macedonia Precinct.

Another potential problem, which Kiker addressed, was how the consolidation of two precincts might affect elections for the local Board of Education.

"Historically, by default," Kiker said, "when you've had (multi-member county commissions) and (multi-member school boards), and you wanted to elect them from districts, you used the voting districts as the default locations.

"If you look at the Towns County Board of Education map, they have two (members) at large and three (members) in the districts. And it's not district one, two and three; it's Hiwassee, Young Harris

and Macedonia, which implies that they're using the voting districts as the districts for the school board.

"My concern is, if we (consolidate the Hiwassee and Macedonia) districts, then do we put four school board members at large without a designated district, and the only one listed is Young Harris? I don't know."

However, Towns County Schools Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong told the Elections Board that he did not believe the consolidation would cause a problem for the local school board.

"If the county voted for (school board) seats by district, then it would make a difference," he said after the meeting. "Our (board members qualify) by district, but the whole county can vote for them."

To reiterate, it's OK that the school district map no longer matches the elections district map, Berrong said, because voters are not restricted to voting for candidates only in their voting district, and the school board districts will remain the same as the old voting districts.

Essentially, the consolidation is all about making sure people can exercise their right to vote, which could become unintentionally jeopardized by understaffed polling places, Oliva said. And fortunately, the drive for former Macedonia voters is only about 2.5 miles farther than before.

"To serve the best needs of the community, you've got to give them the best services possible," Oliva said. "It's not only location, but it's staffing, and to make sure that every-

thing is done with the utmost precision and accuracy, you've got to have quality services."

Added Oliva, "To make sure you have the best quality services possible, the two precincts (are) more manageable for the staff we have that is experienced, along with our board, so (consolidation is) the solution."

In terms of parking and access to the Hiwassee Precinct, located inside the Towns County Civic Center adjacent to the courthouse, Oliva feels confident they have enough Election Day parking options, and that local law enforcement will be able to adequately assist by directing traffic.

Also, in examining past election records, the Elections Board determined that post-consolidation Election Day voting will likely only result in 300 or so more voters showing up to the polls, which board members believe will be easily manageable, especially amid three weeks of early voting.

"The best way we can serve our voters is to be able to run two precincts very effectively rather than trying to run three poorly," Oliva said.

Ultimately, the entire board agreed and voted unanimously to consolidate the Macedonia and Hiwassee Precincts into one Hiwassee Precinct during the Dec. 15 called meeting.

Located at 67 Lakeview Circle Suite A in the same building as the Hiwassee Precinct, the Towns County Elections Board Office can be reached weekdays for more information at 706-896-4353 or tcelections@townscountyga.com.

Local COVID...from Page 1A

inpatients has been shorter than in previous surges, resulting in a smaller number of people needing hospitalization at any given time.

As of Friday morning, Union General had 24 people admitted specifically for COVID. This was down from the current surge record of 25 inpatients, established the previous weekend. Comparatively speaking, this is less than half of the record admissions during delta.

That does not necessarily mean fewer people will have required hospitalization by the end of this surge, as many people are still being admitted; they are just being discharged at an overall faster rate than before, translating to a lower upper bound for the daily hospital census.

"We've had pretty much 20-25 (average daily inpatients) for January," Barnett said. "You have to put that into context, because you're comparing it to the previous two major surges that we've had, but that is a good thing for us.

"Twenty-five is still a lot of COVID patients to have in our hospital, but it's better than (the previous surge records of) 34 or 56.

"It's still been very stressful on the hospital and on the staff because we're really busy anyway and dealing with these patients on top of having a high census with other routine things (at 50 inpatients other Friday for our 45-bed hospital).

"We have our usual OB population. We have lots of orthopedic - fractured hips - and there are just some regular pneumonias out there; there are a lot of respiratory viruses going around that are not COVID. There's no flu admitted right now, but we have admitted some flu."

Most people being admitted for COVID continue to skew toward the elderly, but it is not unheard of for people in their 40s and 50s to require hospitalization. And for the first time during this surge, all five of the hospital's ICU beds were occupied by COVID patients on Friday.

In terms of mortality, the Health System is about a month and a half into the current surge, and by press time, 12 people from around the region had died of COVID at Union General Hospital.

For context, between the 2020-21 winter surge and delta last summer/fall, the Health System only saw three COVID deaths, yet 36 people died locally over the last winter surge

and 51 people died during the delta surge that lasted nearly three months.

Of course, Barnett realizes the ongoing nature of the current surge means the situation could worsen at any time, but she reiterated last week that there definitely appears to be differences in how the present surge is playing out.

"I don't want to minimize what it is, but it is less dramatic in that we have managed to not have to open additional units so far," Barnett said. "We have one ready because we've been so close a couple of times, but we have not occupied another unit with COVID patients like we have the past two surges."

COVID-related emergency room visits are high, but presently, more people visiting the ER for COVID infections are being discharged compared with the past two surges, which is another indication that the level of illness associated with this surge is less severe overall.

The trend of unvaccinated patients requiring hospitalization in larger numbers continues to hold true to date, with about 75%-80% of local COVID inpatients having not received one of the three approved vaccines.

This is down from the greater than 90% of inpatients being unvaccinated during the delta surge, likely due to the more infectious omicron variant that has shown to be less susceptible to vaccine immunity, though vaccination still appears to provide protection against severe illness.

Omicron is the current dominant strain in circulation, though undoubtedly delta is still making the rounds, just to a lesser extent. And while many medical experts believe the latest variant causes less severe illness, it continues to result in infections in the community.

"Our clinics are really busy with outpatient visits for

COVID," Barnett said. "So, there are a lot of people who are sick with COVID, but not as many who are requiring hospitalization."

Fortunately, elective procedures are still being conducted at the Health System, pending room availability.

And as for the Union County and Chatuge Regional nursing homes, residents there are highly vaccinated and continue to do well during this surge, though many suffered major illness and loss of life during the first year of the pandemic before vaccines were available.

COVID vaccines can be readily found at the Health Departments, Synergy Health of Hiwassee, and local pharmacies.

Rapid testing is also available at area pharmacies, and free PCR testing is available Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. via the state-run drive-thru site at Union General Hospital in Blairsville.

The drive-thru testing site is utilizing a new company "and now offers a guaranteed two-day turnaround on COVID-19 test results," according to a recent Union General Hospital Facebook post.

"You now register in person - no more pre-registration offered," the post continues. "Therefore, you will need to have a phone with internet access to be able to register in person.

"The new kits are self-administered swab kits. You will drive up, get in line, register, and will be given a swab kit. You will then swab yourself, seal the kit and turn it in.

"No doctor's order required; no appointment time needed; (and) testing results are guaranteed within two days via email or text message."

For more information on the state of COVID in Georgia and its individual counties, visit <https://dph.georgia.gov/covid-19-daily-status-report>.

Health Board...from Page 1A

she said. "Total revenues were increased by \$38,765.

"Operating expenses have decreased by \$10,670. Total salaries and fringe were \$51,035, and total expenses were up \$40,552 primarily due to salary and fringe increases from a fully staffed health department."

Meeting participants were Taylor, Hocker, Burks, Berrong, Towns County Health Department Office Manager

Laura Ide and Deputy Director of District 2 Environmental Health Jonathan Terry.

Members of the Towns County Board of Health also participated: Chairman Dr. Darren Berrong, Vice Chairman Lois Palmer, Secretary Mary Lynne Kimsey, Cliff Bradshaw, Dr. Robert Stahlkuppe, Judy Slaton and Nicolette Wade.

For more information, visit <https://phdistrict2.org/>.