Like ‘Tetris’: COVID surge turns staff scheduling at California hospital into a frustrating numbers game

Newly hired registered nurse Ricky Miranda, left, works under the supervision of registered nurse preceptor Brian Stevenson in the intensive care unit at Arrowhead Regional Medical Center. (Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times)

BY BRITTNY MEJIA  |  STAFF WRITER
Photography by IRFAN KHAN
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COLTON, Calif. — The 28 patients had camped out for hours and even days in the emergency room of Arrowhead Regional Medical Center. With more than 100 COVID-19-positive patients in the hospital, there weren’t enough in-patient beds to put them in.

In the fourth-floor intensive care unit, tired nurses tended to three COVID patients at a time instead of their normal two. Five nurses were out sick and those tasked with
scheduling staff likened it to a game of “Tetris,” fitting in people wherever they could.

Meanwhile, eight miles away that morning, a handful of Arrowhead nurses pleaded for help from the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors and warned that the county-run hospital would continue to lose nurses if something didn’t change.

One of those circumstances would be difficult enough for a regional hospital to deal with. But all three at once felt disastrous.

The hospital COVID census in San Bernardino County has nearly tripled from 398 before Christmas to 1,107 as of Jan. 13, according to county data. At the peak in January 2021, when the virus caused deaths to skyrocket, that number stood at 1,785.
The sheer number of hospital staff members testing positive for the coronavirus across California recently led state health officials to allow healthcare workers who are infected but asymptomatic to return to work while taking extra precautions to avoid spread. But many hospital officials fear that could worsen problems. Arrowhead is still weighing whether to take that step — one that few could have contemplated a year ago.

“The fact that we’re severely impacted like we were last year and the fact that so many of our nurses have left, or taken travel assignments, or are burnt out and kind of feel deflated or dejected.... Staff morale is at one of the lowest I’ve ever seen,” said Dr. Troy Pennington, an emergency room physician at the hospital.

Pennington said the current surge “feels worse” than the one last winter.
And yet, in many ways, that should not be.

A year ago, COVID tore through California and much of the U.S. when hardly anyone was vaccinated.

The Omicron variant, while highly contagious, is also generally less severe than the Delta one. And yet the current surge — which has overwhelmingly made the unvaccinated seriously ill — has preyed on several factors that have piled up as the pandemic stretches on.

With burned-out workers leaving in droves, hospitals were already facing staffing shortages. And the Omicron variant is so contagious that although the vaccine has protected staff from getting really ill, it has forced many to call out sick.

“We’ve had more people out because of COVID during this surge than we did previously,” Pennington said.
More than two dozen people waited in the ER on a recent Tuesday for a nurse to call their name. They had ailments that had nothing to do with COVID.

Those with flu-like symptoms were directed to a trailer outside near the ambulance bay. The ones who were not seriously ill would be sent home.

In a gray cubicle behind the registration desk, Genesis Interiano, a registered nurse, wrapped a blood pressure cuff around her patient’s arm. It was her first day on the job. Celine Aragon, who was training her, sat nearby guiding Interiano on questions to ask the man.

With all the recently hired nursing graduates, Interiano hadn’t yet been assigned a permanent person for her training — leaving Aragon to fill in.

“Before COVID started spiking again it was a little quieter on a Tuesday,” Aragon said. She wondered whether the National Guard would show up to the hospital like it did last year.

“I don’t know if they’ll step in again or not,” she said. “I think we could definitely use it.”
Dr. Troy Pennington, left, attends to Margaret Mehling, who was injured in a fall, as her son, Scott Mehling, supports her back. (Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times)

The hospital’s emergency room is normally staffed with 24 to 26 nurses, but there have been times where there are half or less, Pennington said. Some night shifts there are only nine.

On this 12-hour shift, Pennington was assigned to supervise the trauma pod and other seriously ill patients. That morning, he was down an ER physician out sick with COVID.

As he moved through each pod — A, B, C and D — Pennington fielded a phone call about a leukemia patient and a request from a physician for a second opinion. At the front of the ER, he called a “code stroke,” after a 47-year-old man came in with weakness in his left side, inability to walk and slurred speech.

In Pod C, a patient on high-flow oxygen asked over and over in Spanish when she could go home. The woman, admitted that morning with a profoundly low oxygen level, would have to be admitted, Pennington said.

There were COVID patients suffering severe shortage of breath and respiratory failure. Of the more than 100 COVID patients in the hospital, about 70% were unvaccinated.
“Sometimes my conversation with the ICU admitting doctor is distilled down to one word: vaccinated or not,” Pennington said. “That one word sometimes conveys more information about prognosis than just about anything else.”

In the trauma pod, Pennington asked Scott Mehling questions about his mother, who had been rushed to the hospital by ambulance after she fell face first onto her tile floor.

Margaret Mehling was on blood thinners, putting her at increased risk for internal bleeding. The 85-year-old, who was COVID negative, would need to be observed for the next 24 hours to ensure she didn’t develop bleeding.

“She’s likely going to get stuck here because we don’t have beds upstairs,” Pennington said. “We don’t have any place to put her.”

There were nearly 30 other patients in the emergency department waiting for beds in the hospital proper. On Monday, that number stood at 44. That puts a strain on resources and the ability to treat incoming ER patients.
Meanwhile, it feels like a different world outside the hospital, where many people seem to be going about their life — something that vaccinated people can generally do with considerably less risk from the virus.

“You walk around outside and you can almost forget we have a pandemic,” Pennington said.

But the reality, he said, is that this is not the time to do anything that could land you in the hospital because the waits alone can be punishing.

“This is not a time to take risks,” he said. “Those things that you take for granted, being able to get an ambulance quickly, being able to get in and be seen quickly in an emergency department, are frequently not happening.”

Nurse Rafael Sanchez, left, evaluates a COVID-19 patient in a triage area established in the hospital parking lot. (Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times)
Upstairs, in 4 North ICU, there were 15 COVID patients and one available bed after a patient died that morning. The hospital recently set up a second ICU to hold overflow COVID patients.

In one of the rooms, Ricky Miranda spoke with a patient who had been admitted the day before after fracturing his back in a fall. When he tested positive for the coronavirus, he was moved to this ICU before getting well enough to be discharged.

Miranda, who graduated from Cal State San Bernardino in May, was hired in October as part of a 61-person nursing cohort. He would finish his training at the end of the month.

Typically, only one or two trainees are brought into the ICU, but with so many empty positions “we’re hiring five, six at a time,” said Zorina Hernandez, the critical care unit manager. She compared scheduling during the surge to a frustrating game of “Tetris.”

“Our staff is working extra, double time, overtime, extra days just to try and pick up for those who are out sick,” Hernandez said. “It’s draining them.”

“We are just getting pushed to our breaking point,” added ICU charge nurse Beth Koelliker. “We can’t function and take care of our normal population with COVID overrunning and taking over an entire ICU.”
Those frustrations simmered over earlier that day at the county Board of Supervisors’ Jan. 11 meeting, where some Arrowhead nurses shared their experiences.

Francisco Amezcua, a registered nurse in the hospital’s emergency department, detailed the strain caused by being short-staffed, stating that “not only does this cause a delay in needed treatment, it also causes nursing staff to work with unsafe patient ratios.”

“It is a numbers game. There will be mistakes, treatments will be delayed and preventable deaths will occur,” Amezcua said. “Please consider this could be your loved one any given day.”

Brittny Mejia

Brittny Mejia is a Metro reporter who joined the Los Angeles Times in 2014. She writes narrative pieces with a strong emphasis on the Latino community and others that make up the diversity of L.A. and California. Mejia was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2021 in local reporting for her investigation with colleague Jack Dolan that exposed failures in Los Angeles County’s safety-net healthcare system.

Irfan Khan

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San Bernardino County delays homeless count citing coronavirus concerns

San Bernardino County is delaying the annual homelessness survey it canceled a year ago, citing COVID-19 concerns for the push to its volunteer-based count that last found a remarkable rise in unsheltered people as of January 2020.

The nation's largest county by square mile joined nearby counties of Riverside, Los Angeles, and Orange in announcing Friday it had gotten federal approval for an almost one-month delay to its 2022 Point-in-Time Count (PITC).

The on-the-ground count was scheduled for Jan. 27 but is now set to occur Feb. 24 in San Bernardino County, which will continue accepting online registrations for new volunteers at one of nearly 20 desert, mountain, and urban areas countywide.

High Desert areas taking volunteers include Adelanto, Apple Valley, Barstow, Twentynine Palms, Victorville and Yucca Valley.

The county will provide a KN95 mask to all volunteers. Surveyors will hand out "hygiene kits" containing masks and hand sanitizer during the survey late next month. This will also mark the third year volunteers conduct the survey via an app requiring a smartphone with internet access.

The U.S Department of Housing normally mandates that all counties hold a PITC before the end of January as a lynchpin to securing federal grant money.

But many counties didn't hold the homeless count at all last year. HUD issued guidance in November 2020, allowing requests for exceptions to the next year's count relating to the novel coronavirus, which emerged in California just a couple of months after the prior survey.

San Bernardino County got federal approval the next month to skip its 2021 survey entirely.
The county's Interagency Council on Homelessness directed its Office of Homeless Services to make the request, according to a letter the two entities' leaders signed on Dec. 21, 2020. It cited fears for the health of employees, volunteers, homeless people and hospital capacities and potential for inaccuracies in the count.

In turn, the survey now set for late February marks the first to account for the homelessness in nearly two years.

The last count found a significant one-year surge had occurred in San Bernardino County's homeless population before COVID-19 was a concept to most, with the High Desert among the centers of that rise.

A total of 3,125 people were counted as homeless countywide on Jan. 23, 2020, according to the PITC report. That marked a 20% increase from the tally logged one year earlier in San Bernardino County.

The PITC breaks down the status of homelessness into two categories: Sheltered for people living in transitional housing or a shelter program; and unsheltered for people with no roof over their head at all.

The uptick in San Bernardino County's last count came primarily in those with no roof at all. The January 2020 survey found 470 more unsheltered people than in the prior year, a 24.5% increase, and 48 more sheltered people, a 7% rise.

Barstow and Victorville were among eight cities noted by the county as focus points. It counted 108 homeless people in Barstow, nearly three-quarters of whom were unsheltered, and 451 in Victorville, the second-highest total behind San Bernardino.

The High Desert has been hit hard by both the health and economic struggles of the last two years and the issue of homelessness on a larger scale.

Cities and unincorporated communities have taken their initiatives to face the latter problem, which locals and law-enforcement officials attribute to myriad causes such as local work conditions declining, the 2007-09 Great Recession and housing crisis, and transients receiving one-way bus tickets from outside hotspots like Los Angeles.

The rate of confirmed COVID-19-positives in San Bernardino County has hit all-time highs alongside record levels of testing and broader fears about the virus' spread since the turn of the new year.
The county's most recent data shows a seven-day moving average of 3,982 new confirmed cases per day as of Dec. 4, slightly more than the prior record of 3,831 per-day cases reported on Dec. 17, 2020.

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In an effort to slow the current COVID-19 surge, many county departments are offering services only online and over the
phone, limiting visitors to their public offices through at least Jan. 28.

“We have a responsibility to do everything we can to limit the spread of the virus while still providing access to the county services people need,” said Board of Supervisors Chairman Curt Hagman.

Services for the following County departments and offices are available by phone and online. In some instances, in-person appointments are available for those who cannot be served remotely.

- Aging and Adult Services
- Agriculture/Weights & Measures
- Assessor-Recorder-Clerk - Appointments available
• Child Support Services

• Clerk of the Board of Supervisors

• Community Development and Housing Agency

• County Fire and Fire Marshal

• District Attorney

• Human Resources

• Inland Counties Emergency Medical Agency (ICEMA)

• Land Use Services (Planning, Building and Safety, and Code Enforcement) – Appointments available

• Public Works – Appointments available
• Purchasing

• Registrar of Voters

• Risk Management

• Transitional Assistance – Some appointments and limited in-person services remain available

• Veterans Affairs

• Workforce Development

Information on how to contact these departments by phone and online is available at sbcounty.gov.

The following County attractions and services are currently closed to the public:
• County branch libraries – Curbside pick-up services are available

• County museums and historical sites

For information about COVID-19, vaccines and testing, visit sbcovid19.com or contact the COVID-19 public information line from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday at 909-387-3911.

For more local news and information click here.
Free COVID-19 vaccinations at Citrus Valley High School

Julie Farren
Jan 14, 2022

Children and adults can receive free vaccinations from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 29, at Citrus Valley High School, the Redlands Unified School District announced during its Jan. 11 virtual board meeting.

Students also were able to bring kits home with them on Wednesday as they returned back to school, said Superintendent Mauricio Arellano.

It also was reported that two new members of the city's Cultural Arts Commission were appointed.

They are: Danielle Guidici Wallis, an artist and shoemaker, and Daniel Goham, owner of The Artland.

An environmental art garden is being proposed on a half-acre of land near Ford Park.

There also is updated news on the future Redlands East Valley High School football stadium on the school's website.

A public memorial service for the late Margaret Hill will be held from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 22, at San Manuel Stadium, 280 S. E Street, in San Bernardino.

Hill was a long-time educator in the San Bernardino City Unified School District and a trustee on the school board.

Those attending are asked to wear purple in Hill's memory.

All COVID protocols will be recognized at the service. Free parking is available.

Julie Farren
California surpasses 7 million coronavirus cases, adding 1 million in one week
California has recorded more than 7 million coronavirus cases, after its fastest accumulation of reported infections in the history of the pandemic.

The unprecedented count, recorded in California’s databases late Monday, comes one week after the state tallied its 6 millionth coronavirus case.

Even during last winter’s disastrous wave, new infections increased more slowly. It took a little over three weeks for California to get from its 2 millionth cumulative coronavirus case to its 3 millionth.
The stunning speed of new infections is a testament to the Omicron variant’s transmissibility, believed to be two to four times more contagious than the Delta variant, which in turn was more infectious than earlier strains that pummeled California last winter.

California’s daily COVID-19 death rate has also risen dramatically. For the seven-day period that ended Sunday, the state was recording 103 deaths a day; that’s roughly double the last week of 2021, when 55 deaths a day were tallied.

At its worst, California’s COVID-19 death rate over a weekly period was 545 deaths a day, reached during late January 2021.

In Los Angeles County, the COVID-19 death rate has doubled in the last week. For the seven-day period ending Monday, the county was averaging 42 deaths a day; for the prior week, the average was 22 deaths a day.

L.A. County’s peak death rate last year was about 240 deaths a day.
While some health officials have said the recent COVID-19 deaths are likely the result of the Delta variant, the L.A. County Department of Public Health in recent days has noted that many fatalities have occurred among people who were infected when Omicron was clearly the dominant variant.

On Saturday, the L.A. County Department of Public Health said that “the majority of deaths reported this week are associated with individuals who became infected after Dec. 20, when Omicron was circulating widely,” suggesting the variant may have a bigger role in COVID-19 deaths than initially believed.

The dramatic surge in infections is contributing to strained hospitals across swaths of California, many of which have said they’ve been forced to cancel scheduled surgeries amid crushing demand in emergency rooms.

The high rate of infections has also contributed to even scarcer staffing in hospitals. California’s state epidemiologist, Dr. Erica Pan, said last week that “we are seeing near-crisis levels” of emergency room overcrowding in certain areas.

With fewer hospital workers, it’s harder to admit patients from the emergency room, which then keeps ambulances waiting for long periods to drop off patients, resulting in a worsening of 911 response times to new callers, Pan said.

The number of overall patients admitted into hospitals for all reasons last week was nearing the state’s pandemic record. As of the middle of last week, there were some 52,400 patients in California’s hospitals, just shy of the record of 53,000 admitted during the worst of last winter’s surge, a time when many hospitals were overwhelmed.
By Sunday, there were 2,185 coronavirus-positive patients in California’s intensive care units, a number that exceeds the height of the summer Delta surge, when there were 2,128. The latest number remains well below the state’s record of 4,868 recorded during last winter’s peak, a time when few people were immunized.

There were 14,211 coronavirus-positive patients in California’s hospitals on Sunday, more than double the amount on New Year’s Day, when there were 6,237. The latest number exceeds the height of California’s summer surge, when 8,353 coronavirus-positive patients were hospitalized, but is far below the peak experienced last winter, when the number reached 21,938.

In Northern California, some officials have expressed hope that a cresting of the winter wave may come soon.

In Santa Clara County, Northern California’s most populous county, coronavirus levels in wastewater started declining about 1 1/2 weeks ago. Officials expect the dip will presage a sustained decline in coronavirus cases.

And the exponential growth in the greater San Francisco Bay Area’s case rate also appears to be leveling off, although it will probably take a few days — following any reporting backlog from the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend — to be sure.

For the most recent seven-day period, the Bay Area was averaging about 20,000 coronavirus cases a day, a little less than the 22,000 a day for the prior week. The greater Sacramento area recorded about 5,700 cases a day for the most recent weekly period, a bit lower than the prior week, when 6,000 daily cases were reported.
But Southern California is still tallying increases.

The greater Southern California region recorded 79,000 new cases a day over the most recent seven-day period, a bit higher than 78,000 from the prior week. Still, the exponential growth appears to have slowed; two weeks ago, Southern California was averaging 23,000 new cases a day.

L.A. County is averaging about 40,000 cases a day for the most recent timeframe, up from 36,000 cases a day for the prior week. The week before that, the county was averaging 19,000 cases a day.

The greater San Joaquin Valley tallied 9,400 cases a day over the last week, higher than 7,300 cases a day for the week before.

Some states on the East Coast that were hit earlier by the Omicron wave have started to see a sustained decline in cases. New York recorded a peak of about 90,000 new coronavirus cases a day for the seven-day period that ended Jan. 9; that figure has fallen to 40,000 a day for the seven-day period that ended Monday.
L.A. County sees 10-month high in COVID death rate

Francis Delpech gets tested this month at 911 COVID Testing on Sepulveda Boulevard in Los Angeles. (Myung J. Chun/Los Angeles Times)

BY RONG-GONG LIN II, LUKE MONEY, HAYLEY SMITH

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Los Angeles County saw an average of 40 coronavirus deaths a day over the past week, the highest such rate in nearly 10 months, a sign that the prolific Omicron variant may be deadlier than many initially believed.

The county’s daily COVID-19 death rate has doubled in just a week, officials said. According to a Times analysis, the last time average daily deaths has been this high was for the seven-day period that ended on March 28, 2021.

The daily death tally in the county has climbed dramatically in recent days. On Tuesday, 15 deaths were reported; Wednesday, 39; Thursday, 45; Friday, 48; Saturday, 66, the highest number in more than nine months; and Sunday, 53.

“As deaths often lag behind surges in cases and hospitalizations, sadly, the increase in deaths does not come as a surprise, and tragically, we are prepared for even higher number of deaths in the coming weeks,” said L.A. County Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer.
The latest average daily death figure remains well below that of the peak of last winter, when very few people were vaccinated because of limited supply. At that time, L.A. County was averaging about 240 COVID-19 deaths a day.

Much has been said about Omicron being less likely to cause severe illness and death than earlier variants. Around New Year’s Eve, headlines emerged about South Africa heading out of its Omicron surge with relatively few deaths.

Experts have pointed out that Omicron in adults is less likely to infect the lungs, which can result in difficulty breathing, while being more contagious in the upper respiratory system. There are also fewer critically ill COVID-19 patients in the county compared to last winter: the number of coronavirus patients in the intensive care unit is just 36% of the peak of last winter’s surge, when there were 1,731.

But some experts warn that the U.S., with a demographically older population, could experience a deadlier Omicron wave than South Africa. And in L.A. County, data are emerging that this winter’s surge is resulting in more critically ill patients than seen during last summer’s wave.

Just in the last week, L.A. County’s number of ICU patients with COVID-19 soared past the peak of the earlier Delta surge. In late August, the number of coronavirus ICU patients peaked at 463; L.A. County surpassed that number on Jan. 9, and as of Saturday, there were 622, a figure that continues to climb.

Some experts have warned against underplaying how severely ill some people will get when infected with the coronavirus this winter, particularly if they remain unvaccinated, haven’t received their booster shot, are older or have underlying medical conditions.

Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of the Brown University School of Public Health, tweeted that he recently cared for elderly patients hospitalized for COVID-19 who hadn’t received their booster and said they didn’t realize they needed it or were eligible. Jha also treated an unvaccinated person who couldn’t believe he had to be hospitalized after being reinfected with the coronavirus; he had previously survived COVID-19 last spring, also with a hospital stay.

“He couldn’t believe he had COVID again,” Jha tweeted. He “had been told he had life-long immunity. The misinformation on infection-induced immunity is costing lives.”

Health officials warn that early estimates of Omicron’s mildness are still subject to change as more data emerge.

Before Omicron started spreading in L.A. County, in early November, nearly 75% of coronavirus-positive patients were being treated for illness related to COVID-19, while the remainder were in the hospital for reasons incidental to their coronavirus infection.

L.A. County officials initially estimated that, as Omicron spread, only 46% of coronavirus-positive patients admitted around the Christmas holidays required hospital care for reasons related to their viral infection. But late last week, based on more recent data, officials said a greater share of coronavirus-positive patients actually needed care for a COVID-19-related illness: 58%.
Dr. Eric Topol, director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute in La Jolla, said last week he thinks there are more coronavirus-positive people in the hospital being treated “for” COVID-19, rather than being in the hospital “with” a coronavirus infection.

“We have this maybe warped view about how mild, or milder, Omicron is when it clearly can kill and put a lot of people in the hospital,” Topol said during an online discussion Thursday with Dr. Robert Wachter, chair of UC San Francisco’s Department of Medicine. “Too many have tried to minimize the hospitalizations ... and I think we are grossly overestimating the ‘with’ rather than the ‘for’ COVID.”

Recently the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, said she suspected that most recent COVID-19 deaths are a result of people infected with the Delta variant rather than Omicron.

But on Saturday, the L.A. County Department of Public Health said that “the majority of deaths reported this week are associated with individuals who became infected after Dec. 20, when Omicron was circulating widely,” suggesting that Omicron may end up playing a bigger role in COVID-19 deaths than initially believed.

While early studies have shown that, with more recent COVID-19 patients, there’s less of a need for an artificial oxygen supply or for them to be placed on a mechanical ventilator, “that’s not universally the case,” Dr. Paul Simon, chief science officer for the L.A. County Department of Public Health, said in an interview Friday.

Simon said about half the recent deaths were among people diagnosed with a coronavirus infection this month, when Omicron had become the dominant variant. “So it’s not that Omicron is completely harmless. It can cause severe disease in some people,” he said.

Unvaccinated people have the highest risk of being infected and becoming severely ill, but it’s also possible some vaccinated people, especially those who are elderly and who are vulnerable to COVID-19 complications, will get breakthrough infections and become severely ill.

The coming weeks will be “a bad time to be hospitalized,” said UC San Francisco infectious-diseases expert Dr. Peter Chin-Hong, “when California will probably already be in the middle of being bursted at the seams for increased hospitalization.”

Meanwhile, Los Angeles County is continuing to report a high number of new daily coronavirus cases. On Sunday, 43,883 new coronavirus cases were reported.

For the seven-day period that ended Sunday, L.A. County is now averaging about 41,000 coronavirus cases a day, a huge spike compared to the prior week, when the county reported about 32,000 cases a day. Last winter, L.A. County peaked at 16,000 cases a day.
New coronavirus cases among nursing home residents is also climbing, concerning officials, which analyzed the numbers for the seven-day period that ended Jan. 2 and compared them to the prior week.

As of Jan. 8, there were 137 active coronavirus outbreaks in skilled nursing facilities, which officials said was an 88% increase from the prior week. While 91% of nursing home residents and 97% of staff have received vaccinations, only 54% of staff have received a booster, while 85% of residents have done so.

Officials say they believe the booster rate among staff will rise following a requirement issued on Dec. 23 that workers in hospitals and skilled nursing facilities get a booster shot; the deadline to get one arrives Feb. 1.

The number of coronavirus-positive people who are hospitalized continued to climb. According to data released Sunday, as of Saturday, there were 4,507 coronavirus-positive people in L.A. County’s hospitals, a quintupling since Christmas, when there were 904 coronavirus-positive patients.

The number of coronavirus-positive patients admitted in L.A. County’s hospitals remain well below the peak of last winter, when 8,098 were in hospitals on Jan. 5, 2021.
Should I take a rapid COVID-19 test or a PCR? Public health experts break down the facts.

BOSTON, MA. – December 13: Gov. Charlie Baker announced the distribution of 2 million free rapid COVID-19 antigen test from iHealth, similar to those pictured here, during a briefing at the Massachusetts State House on December 13, 2021 in Boston, Massachusetts. (Photo by Amanda Sabga/MediaNews Group/Boston Herald)

By ERIN TIERNEY | etiernan@bostonherald.com | Boston Herald
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Hours-long lines for coronavirus PCR tests are prompting public officials to push the masses to use rapid, at-home antigen tests instead, but public health experts warn the 15-minute tests are sometimes prone to false negatives.

Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker last week said: “Rapid tests, in some ways, are a more accurate measure of whether or not somebody is actually transmitting COVID than a PCR test is.”

Dr. Davidson Hamer, Boston University Professor of Global Health and Medicine called the governor’s statement “strong.”

Dr. Todd Ellerin, director of infectious disease at South Shore Health said while there’s “some truth” to the governor's statement, “it’s complicated.”

We asked the experts to break down the accuracy of rapid at-home antigen tests, PCR tests and lay out when one should be used over the other. Answers have been edited slightly for clarity.

How accurate are rapid antigen tests compared to PCR tests?
Should I take a rapid COVID-19 test or a PCR? Public health experts break down the facts. – San Bernardino Sun

Ellerin: PCR results, which are tested in a lab, are much more accurate. But if you look at the arc for a PCR, it can last much longer and is often picking up a past infection that may no longer be infectious. When a rapid test is positive, that's probably the point when a person is most infectious. On the other hand, if you are symptomatic and test negative on a rapid antigen test, that does not mean you do not have COVID. You need to stay cautious and you need to retake that test several times over a couple of days. Taking rapid tests multiple times over a short period of days increases the likelihood of an accurate result.

Hamer: With the rapid tests, if you are positive, then there's a good likelihood that a person is able to transmit the virus at that point in time, but the PCR is much more sensitive. It can detect earlier, but may be positive before a person has enough viral load to transmit and also after a person's symptoms have resolved and past the point of transmission. The rapid, however, may come back negative before the onset of symptoms when a person is still able to transmit so the PCR remains the best possible test right now, despite its limitations.

Are all rapid tests created equal?

Ellerin: It's unclear if all rapid antigen tests are created equal but they all have an Emergency Use Authorization from the FDA, so there's a minimum accuracy that they needed to prove. But remember, these tests were proven pre-omicron. Ideally, we'd like these tests to be validated. Until that happens there's a high probability these tests are missing infections. It's also important people carefully read the instructions.

Hamer: A pretty large number are FDA reviewed and approved, under the Emergency Use Authorization. They're not all not the same, but they are similar in their ability to detect an infection in somebody who is symptomatic. A study of roughly 80 at-home antigen tests found the accuracy is near 100% in cases where patients had a high viral load, but it drops off pretty quickly. That means patients who are asymptomatic or who have a low viral load may still be transmitting, but their infection could be missed by a rapid test.

When should I take a rapid coronavirus test versus a PCR test?

Ellerin: The good news about the rapid test is you get results back quickly, so if you don't have access to a PCR, you can still get an idea. There is the concern over missed infections, however, particularly when it comes to omicron and whatever variant comes after that. The best time to use a PCR is when you can get the results back quickly.

Hamer: If somebody develops symptoms and they want an answer quickly, antigen is the way to go, especially if there's no access to a PCR test. Antigen tests are more likely to be accurate if you're symptomatic and had an exposure in the last 2 to 5 days. PCR tests are good for population-level surveillance like the pooled testing happening in schools where the key is to try to catch infections early. PCRs are really useful if there is a short turnaround time of less than 24 hours and the cost is low.

Should I take a rapid antigen test before attending events?

Ellerin: In an ideal world, yes. But for it to work, people would be testing couple a couple of days before and again right before. Unfortunately, there isn't enough accessibility to the rapid antigen tests right now for that to happen.

Hamer: I'm not sure if this can be used as an effective screening tool to go into events. If someone is infectious but has no symptoms, the likelihood of an antigen test finding someone infectious is low.

Tags: Coronavirus, Top Stories Breeze, Top Stories IVDB, Top Stories LADN, Top Stories LBPT, Top Stories OCR, Top Stories PE, Top Stories PSN, Top Stories RDF, Top Stories SGV, Top Stories Sun, Top Stories WDN

Erin Tierney | Reporter
MENIFEE, Calif. — He became a wrestler because his father was a wrestler. He planned to work at the same power plant as his dad when he graduated from high school.

It seemed fitting that they shared the same name: Anthony Michael Reyes.

Then, last summer, COVID-19 swept through the Reyes family. Within weeks, Anthony Sr. was dead.
Anthony Jr. rarely slept. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw his father in a hospital bed. He kept the lights on in his room. He held in his tears so he could console his mother and two sisters.

He had wanted to be his dad his whole life. Now, at 17, he was thrust into the role. If his younger sister wasn’t feeling well, he’d stay with her. If his mother had an appointment, he wanted to be there.

Even before his father’s death, the teen had written a school paper on the pain of life during the pandemic.
“The whole coronavirus affected me in many ways, and the way the pandemic affected me the most was through my mental state,” he wrote in August 2020. “With everything being closed, it was becoming increasingly harder to stay home with my depression.”

The pandemic, which has seemed to drag on for a lifetime, has worsened a mental health crisis for youths across the country.

In a public health advisory issued last month, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy wrote that “the pandemic era’s unfathomable number of deaths, pervasive sense of fear, economic instability, and forced physical distancing from loved ones, friends, and communities have exacerbated the unprecedented stresses young people already faced.”

About 167,000 children under 18 have lost a parent or other in-home caregiver to COVID-19, according to a December report by researchers from the COVID Collaborative and Social Policy Analytics. Black and Latino children experienced more than twice the rate of loss of white children.

“American youth have lived through one of the most historic, unprecedented increases in mortality that our country has seen in literally decades,” said Emily Smith-Greenaway, an associate professor of sociology and spatial sciences at USC who last year co-authored a study on COVID-19 and parental death.

“We clearly need interventions and programs and services to really address young people’s poor mental health as a result of all that they’ve endured.”

::
Anthony Jr., known to his family as Papi, hated quarantining.

The bright-eyed boy had to stop wrestling. It was a big blow for the teen, who had placed second in his last tournament. He couldn’t see his girlfriend, “and that was torture for him,” said his mother, Stephanie.

The family had to be careful as the pandemic worsened. Anthony Sr. had a heart condition, Anthony Jr. had asthma and Stephanie had lupus and rheumatoid arthritis — all health conditions that made them more likely to get severely ill if infected by the virus.

When Anthony Sr. returned to their home in Riverside County from his work as a power plant operator, he’d take his clothing off in the garage, throw it into the wash and then shower. The family went through loads of hand sanitizer and Lysol.

At the start of the pandemic, Anthony Jr. would roll out of bed minutes before Zoom classes started. Students were supposed to still wear their uniforms, but at times the teen showed up in pajamas, recalled Cheryl Bennett, an instructional aide.

“Coronavirus was mainly a burden for me because it forced me to distance myself from my friends and my girlfriend,” he wrote in the August 2020 paper. “That’s what caused my depression but then I luckily got better and thankful that I am a happy little boy today.”

Anthony Jr. returned to in-person classes at Santa Rosa Academy in August. He had watched his sister Marissa, who is 13 months older, miss out on her senior year with classmates and he was excited he’d return to school for his.
Stephanie Reyes, 37, lost her husband to COVID in September 2021. "All my kids, they lost their dad. I can't make that pain for them go away," she said. "But my son, he was more worried about us than he was worried about himself." (Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times)

“He was so happy, because now they were 'top dogs,'” Stephanie said. The only regret among the three siblings, who included 15-year-old Reyna, was that they had missed their chance to attend high school together.

In class, Anthony Jr. — who was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder — was a “big ball of energy” but respectful to his teachers. He received one-on-one help from Bennett, which helped him stay on track.

Although the teen stood only 5 feet 5, he was quick to defend anyone in trouble.

When a classmate’s mother died of COVID last February, Anthony Jr. offered his support. When Bennett’s brother died during the pandemic, the teen messaged her asking if she needed anything.

“He was very, very, very empathetic and caring,” Bennett said.

As he navigated a new school year, his parents finalized their purchase of a five-bedroom home in Menifee. His sisters would each have a room of their own. He was going to help his dad fix it up.
On Aug. 27, Anthony Jr. attended the first sports pep rally of the 2021 school year. Soon after, the family received a notice from the school: One of their children had been in contact with someone who had tested positive.

They received the keys to their new home four days later. By then, they all had COVID.

The family was not vaccinated, holding off because of concerns over their health conditions and fear of side effects on their children. Experts say COVID-19 vaccines are generally safe for people like them, who have all the more reason to get the shots because of their vulnerability to serious illness.

Despite feeling sick, Anthony Sr., 46, continued packing up the U-Haul truck in the driveway, desperate to realize their dream.

Within a week, he was put on a ventilator.

On Sept. 11, 2021, Anthony Sr. died.
Anthony Reyes Jr. and his father were best friends.

If his sisters teased him, their father jumped in on his son’s side and vice versa. It was always girls against boys. Father and son shared the same contagious smile and laugh.

“He was just like Anthony,” Stephanie’s sister, Nicole Mulgado, said. “It was like a copy and paste.”
When the hospital allowed just two people to see Anthony Sr. in the COVID ward after he died, Anthony Jr. pleaded to go. That’s when the teen saw blood pooled in the corner of his father’s eye. He could never erase the image from his mind. Some nights, he went to his mother’s room so she could hold him.

Every morning and every night before he went to bed, Anthony Jr. would kiss his father’s urn.

“All my kids, they lost their dad. I can’t make that pain for them go away,” Stephanie said. “But my son, he was more worried about us than he was worried about himself.”

Now a family of four, they moved into their new home. They used a staple gun to hold up the living room curtains. They didn’t fix the fence as they had planned.

Anthony Jr. decided not to wrestle. He couldn’t do it without his dad, who had been at every match cheering him on.

As days turned into weeks and weeks into months, the family started to rebuild. They began to fix up the house — their way of honoring Anthony Sr. Reyna and Anthony Jr. went to homecoming. In December, Marissa wrestled with her younger brother, and their laughter echoed through the house like old times.

“We were starting to mend a little from after losing my husband,” 37-year-old Stephanie said.
Anthony Reyes Jr., second from right, with his sisters Marissa, left, Reyna, right, and mother Stephanie Reyes, celebrating on Christmas morning. (Reyes family)

But at times, Anthony Jr. would blame himself for getting sick at school and bringing it home.

Other days, he would yell at the photos of himself and his father that were printed on a blanket given to him by his grandmother: “Why did you leave us?”

Stephanie tried to get her children help, but wait times for therapy stretched for months.

On Dec. 27, Anthony Jr. went to the gym with his best friend. He made it home just in time for his 8:30 p.m. curfew. He thanked his younger sister for switching his bedding to the dryer, said goodnight to his mother and told her he loved her.
At 4 a.m., Stephanie jolted awake. As she walked downstairs to get water, she spotted the light underneath her son’s door. She knocked and then went in.

Inside the bedroom, decorated with his father’s Dodgers caps, a cross from the funeral service and pillows that still held his dad’s scent, Anthony Jr. had taken his own life.

Anthony Jr. did not leave a note explaining his despair. But he had endured a pandemic, the loss of his father, the pain of isolation and the heartaches that come with being a teenager.

For Stephanie, the only person who would have understood the pain of losing her son was her husband.

“Five months ago, I had my whole family together, safe,” she said, her body shaking with sobs. “The pain of losing a best friend is bad. But losing my baby is the worst pain I have ever been in.”
Inside the Reyes home, framed collages from Anthony Sr.’s funeral service were propped up in the entryway.

There were father and son at the power plant, both in hard hats and grinning.

There was Anthony Sr. with his arms around his girls during a father-daughter dance. He had been on a work assignment and was unable to get a flight out. He drove seven hours so he didn’t miss it.

“My dad was my best friend as well. When he passed, Anthony became mine,” Reyna said. “I had Anthony with me to take on that role, kind of like my dad. Now that he passed, it’s going to be a little harder.”

After Anthony Jr.’s death, Stephanie’s mother, Carmen Amador, spent hours on the phone trying to get counseling for her daughter and granddaughters. She estimates that she talked to about 50 people before she found someone with availability.

Stephanie, Marissa and Reyna are now meeting with a therapist once a week. After the first session, Reyna said she felt better than she had before.

The family is now preparing for a second funeral service. Stephanie expedited the delivery of her son’s class ring, which he had designed with his father. On one side is the Mexican flag and on the other, two wrestlers.

The grieving son had requested that his father’s name be added to the inside of the ring, so he “would be with him all the time.”

She plans to slip the ring onto her son’s finger. So he can wear it just once.
Fourth Pfizer dose is insufficient to ward off omicron, Israeli trial suggests

By Daniel Avis | Bloomberg

A fourth dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine was insufficient to prevent infection with the omicron variant of Covid-19, according to preliminary data from a trial in Israel released Monday.

Two weeks after the start of the trial of 154 medical personnel at the Sheba Medical Center in Tel Aviv, researchers found the vaccine successfully raised antibody levels.

But that only offered a partial defense against omicron, according to Gili Regev-Yochay, the trial's lead researcher. Vaccines which were more effective against previous variants offer less protection with omicron, she said. Still, those infected in the trial had only slight symptoms or none at all.

Israel started rolling out the fourth dose of the vaccine to the over-60s and immunocompromised in late December amid a surge in cases. Since then, more than half a million Israelis have received the extra dose, according to the Health Ministry.
The decision to give the fourth vaccine to the most vulnerable was the correct one, Regev-Yochay said at a virtual press conference, since it may have given additional benefit against omicron. But she added the results didn't support a wider rollout to the whole population.

Researchers at Sheba are also conducting a trial using a fourth dose of the Moderna vaccine on 120 volunteers who had previously received three shots of the Pfizer-BioNTech jab. One week into the trial, they found a similar rise in antibodies to those that had been given four Pfizer doses, according to Regev-Yochay.

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Tags: Coronavirus
Kaiser Permanente has notified 3,900 patients vaccinated with at its Walnut Creek Medical Center last fall they may have received less than a full dose of the Pfizer shot.

Kaiser is sending notices this month offering those who received the light shots appointments for a "repeat" dose if they want one. But the HMO said that after consulting with experts and reviewing guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the dosing error should not significantly reduce immunity.

“The health and safety of our members and patients is our highest priority,” Kaiser Permanente said in a statement. “As a trusted health care provider, we are committed to informing patients of circumstances that could affect them, even if any potential impact is not considered significant, as in this matter.”

Patients who received the Moderna or Johnson and Johnson vaccines are not affected.

It’s not the first time Bay Area patients have been given improper doses of COVID-19 vaccines. In November, a Sutter Health pediatric clinic in Antioch gave 14 kids ages 5-11 twice the proper dose of Pfizer's children's version of the COVID-19 vaccine.
Kaiser gave Walnut Creek patients low COVID-19 vaccine doses

Last March, KTVU reported that 4,300 people were administered a third less than the recommended dose while getting a shot at the Oakland Coliseum mass vaccination clinic. In that case, state officials told the TV station that no one was offered additional doses because the dosage error wasn't considered significant.

Problems have arisen nationally as well. Last fall 112 children at a Virginia pharmacy received one-tenth of the formulation of the vaccine intended for adults, and 98 kids in Maryland received over-diluted doses at a school clinic.

In the most recent incident involving Kaiser, the health care organization said patients who were supposed to have been given the 0.30 milliliter dose of the Pfizer vaccine for teens and adults instead received 0.26 to 0.29 milliliter doses between Oct. 25 and Dec. 10, 2021.

"Once we became aware of this issue, we immediately consulted with experts in infectious diseases and vaccine science and reviewed guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control," Kaiser said. "All experts agreed the difference between the recommended dose and the dose an individual may have received was not significant and not likely to reduce their protection against COVID-19."

According to the CDC, vaccine administrators are required to notify patients of any dosage errors, report them to the agency's Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System even if they did not cause any problems, and consult with state authorities on how the erroneous dosage should be recorded.

The CDC says that when a lower-than-authorized dose is given to adults, such as when the patient pulls away, the syringe leaks or equipment fails, the dose should be repeated immediately.

Kaiser said it "took immediate steps to confirm that the issue was isolated and promptly retrained staff and validated their understanding of the correct procedure."

"We are continuously monitoring so this does not happen again," Kaiser said. "We sincerely apologize for any concern or inconvenience this may cause for those patients we are contacting."
California throws more money at COVID-19 contact tracing, but is it too late?

One expert says that because omicron spreads so quickly, the millions spent on contact tracing could be better spent on more effective masks and more testing.
Intensive contact tracing has helped contain COVID-19 outbreaks in some Asian countries. People test positive, they quarantine, and the folks they've had contact with are tracked down and asked to — or, in some nations, forced to — quarantine as well.

The U.S. has spent billions on contact tracing, and California alone will have spent $300 million on it through the next fiscal year. But researchers have found that 2 of 3 people with confirmed COVID-19 in the U.S. were either not reached or wouldn't name contacts when interviewed, and public health authorities haven't been able to monitor enough cases to stem the tide.

Now, as the pandemic enters its third year, the highly contagious omicron variant spreads like fire through dry grass. The incubation period can be as short as two days. The Centers for Disease Control recommends isolation for as little as five days. More people are testing at home — cases authorities don't even count in their tallies — and some officials are throwing their hands up and suspending contact tracing.

“(T)he sheer speed of omicron's transmission means people are exposed, infected and then contagious before the local health department can even identify an outbreak, much less get word to those who are exposed,” said officials in Oregon's Multnomah County. “Because of that dynamic, contact tracing has become much less effective at lowering COVID-19's risk, especially when cases are surging so high and when spending time in any indoor public space is essentially considered an exposure for anyone who isn't up-to-date on their vaccines.”

**Financial commitment waning**

The financial commitment to contact tracing in California appears to be waning, but remains. The governor’s proposed budget shows that $258.3 million was spent on contact tracing over the first two years of the pandemic, with another $38.9 million going forward through the end of the next fiscal year.

The current and future spending breaks down to a projected $20.6 million this fiscal year, and $18.3 million next fiscal year, said Sonja Petek, principal fiscal and policy analyst for the Legislative Analyst’s Office.
“Contact tracing remains one of our many key tools in responding to the spread of COVID-19,” said a statement from Gov. Gavin Newsom’s press office. “It’s also an important measure utilized in high-risk and congregate settings. Contact tracing assists with notifying exposed people for possible post-exposure treatment, testing, and quarantine in a timely manner.”

Overall, Newsom’s budget proposes $110 million to increase public health and humanitarian efforts at the California-Mexico border — including vaccinations, testing, isolation and quarantine services — “and expanded statewide contact tracing activities to help keep Californians safe and slow the spread.”

Currently, 268 state employees have been redirected to contact tracing efforts, the governor’s press office said. But experts aren’t sure the investment will bring great returns — at least not right now.

**Uphill climb**

“As higher and higher levels of COVID-19 transmission occur in a community, the importance and efficiency of contact tracing becomes diminished and exceeds the capacity of health departments to effectively conduct such tracing in a timely manner when staff are overwhelmed by the sheer number of cases,” said Dr. Robert Kim-Farley, professor of epidemiology and community health sciences with the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, by email.
“Also, with so much asymptomatic spread occurring, contact tracing of known cases becomes a smaller part of the total transmission occurring in the community. Under these circumstances, everyone needs to take increased precautions (e.g., vaccination, masking, and testing) under the assumption that some of the people they are in contact with may be infected.”

Kim-Farley is not alone.

The CA Notify app can send notifications to a user’s cellphone alerting them if they have been in close proximity to someone who has tested positive for coronavirus. (Photo by Leonard Ortiz, Orange County Register/SCNG)

“Omicron has an average incubation period of about three days,” said Dr. John Swartzberg, clinical professor emeritus with UC Berkeley’s division of infectious diseases and vaccinology, by email. “Individuals may be contagious up to 48 hours before they become ill. Thus, many infected people will be spreading the virus a day or two after being infected. This would represent a temporal challenge to effective contact tracing.”

Andrew Noymer, an epidemiologist and demographer at UC Irvine, agrees.

“It is widely understood by now that omicron is the most contagious COVID variant yet,” Noymer said by email. “Under-appreciated, I think, is how its shorter incubation period (which is probably not unrelated to the contagiousness) is acting synergistically to drive the explosiveness of the current omicron wave. Which brings us to the question of contact tracing.

“Public health experts are often loathe to cast aspersions on the usefulness of contact tracing, because it is a cornerstone principle of our field. But the sheer contagiousness of omicron, plus its shortened incubation period, both affect the margin of error for contact tracing on a case-by-case basis, and really hamstring it in the aggregate. For the moment, doubling-down on contact tracing is not where I would allocate additional resources. The money is better spent on securing N-95 masks for those willing to wear them, who aren’t already, and on making tests available to safety-net populations.”

Richard Carpiano, a public health scientist and medical sociologist at UC Riverside, laments the nation’s underinvestment in vital pieces of the pandemic puzzle — particularly clear communication and public education to combat rampant mis- and dis-information — and passionately believes we need to direct more money there.
Much of the work is happening at the county level. San Bernardino County, for example, spent $16.5 million on contact tracing through the end of 2021, and has 183 contact tracers on staff. That’s down from the 440 tracers it had at its peak, said spokesman David Wert.

The omicron surge may hurt the efficacy of contact tracing now, but Berkeley’s Swartzberg has hope for the future. The infusion of money will allow government to make contact tracing more robust, and “as the number of omicron cases wanes, contact tracing should become a much more potent public health tool,” he said.

Dr. George Rutherford, professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at UC San Francisco, is in this camp as well.

“All we have to do is get past the hump in the next couple of weeks, contact tracing is going to be doable again,” Rutherford said by email. “I’d probably focus primarily on schools.”

All told, California expects direct COVID-19 expenditures — testing, contact tracing, vaccine distribution and administration, hospital and medical surge — to total $3.2 billion this fiscal year, and $1.3 billion in the next fiscal year, according to the legislative analyst’s most recent analysis.

The governor’s budget tallies the state’s total pandemic response — including things like medical supply purchases, housing for homeless people, food programs and support for small businesses — at $9.5 billion. Of that, about $235 million, or about 2.5%, has been spent on community engagement.
COVID cases and deaths are rising again at U.S. nursing homes

Edward Williams, 62, a resident at the Hebrew Home at Riverdale, N.Y., receives a COVID-19 booster shot in September. (Seth Wenig / Associated Press)

BY MEG KINNARD AND BRYAN GALLION | ASSOCIATED PRESS
JAN. 17, 2022 12:25 PM PT
COVID-19 infections are soaring again at U.S. nursing homes because of the Omicron wave, and deaths are climbing too, leading to new restrictions on family visits and a renewed push to get more residents and staff members vaccinated and boosted.

Nursing homes were the lethal epicenter of the pandemic early on, before the vaccine allowed many of them to reopen to visitors last year. But the wildly contagious variant has dealt them a setback.

Nursing homes reported a near-record of about 32,000 COVID-19 cases among residents in the week ending Jan. 9, an almost sevenfold increase from a month earlier, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A total of 645 COVID-19-related deaths among residents were recorded during the same week, a 47% increase from the earlier period. And there are fears that deaths could go much higher before Omicron is through.

Despite the rising numbers, the situation is not as dire as it was in December 2020, when nursing home deaths per week topped out at about 6,200. Experts credit the high vaccination rates now among nursing home residents: About 87% are fully vaccinated, according to CDC data.

COVID-19 shots and boosters provide strong protection against severe illness, hospitalization and death, but the sick and elderly are uniquely vulnerable to the virus.

Nursing home officials say they are responding to the outbreak by limiting visitors to common areas instead of allowing them into residents’ rooms, and by reinstituting social distancing.

Some states, like New York, have put their own measures in place, like requiring proof of a negative test for visitors and providing all with surgical masks.

Nursing homes are also working to drive up vaccination numbers, especially for boosters. Sixty-three percent of nursing home residents nationally have received an extra dose.
Booster numbers are much worse for staff members. About 83% are fully vaccinated, but only 29% have gotten an extra dose.

Nursing homes have been holding vaccine clinics and town hall meetings to stress the importance of the shots.

They also got another tool to increase vaccinations Thursday when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a Biden administration vaccine mandate for most health care workers in the U.S.

About 57,200 nursing home workers — by far the highest number on record during the pandemic — had the virus in the week ending Jan. 9, a more than tenfold increase from a month earlier, according to the CDC.

Sharon Wheeler was shocked to learn that her 88-year-old, dementia-stricken father recently contracted COVID-19 at a Naperville, Illinois, nursing home. She said she hopes the fact that he is fully vaccinated and boosted will help him pull through.

She said she suspects visitors and residents coming and going around the holidays brought COVID-19 inside. Wheeler hasn’t been allowed to see her father, but the staff told her he had mild symptoms.

“I worked so hard to make sure he never got [COVID-19], because I was so terrified,” she said. “He’s such an older man, and I don’t want to lose him this way.”

Vaccinations are just one of the many tools that should be used to defend the elderly against Omicron, said Eric Feigl-Ding, an epidemiologist and senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists. He also recommended testing of visitors, mandatory boosters and the use of medical-grade masks like N95s and high-efficiency air filters.

“We need to build a Fort Knox around protecting nursing homes, but we’re not doing that right now, and that’s why cases are surging,” Feigl-Ding said Thursday. “We’re going to have exponential numbers of hospitalizations and deaths.”

The virus dealt a devastating blow in late November to the New Hampshire nursing home that Todd Fernald runs, called Webster at Rye, where 100% of residents and staff were vaccinated — but not boosted.

“COVID ripped through this building in 10 seconds,” said Fernald, recalling how, on the day that extra shots were scheduled to be administered, an outbreak occurred that would ultimately kill six residents, infect dozens of others and sicken 20 employees.

Since then, nearly all residents have been boosted, and employees are getting their third shots.

“I only lost one employee who didn’t want to be vaccinated and chose to resign their job,” Fernald said. “I’m having more and more people each and every week that I see are getting boosted and bringing me their booster cards.”
Making sure that facilities have supplies like tests is crucial too, said Lisa Sanders of LeadingAge, an association of nonprofit providers of aging services, including nursing homes.

“Older adults and the people they care for should be prioritized for support and supplies as they become available,” Sanders said.
Fontana seemingly violated the Brown Act when it approved a settlement agreement with former City Manager Ken Hunt in 2019 and now refuses to release any records showing why elected officials paid him more than $1.1 million to leave his post three years early.
Hunt’s departure originally was framed by Mayor Acquanetta Warren as a retirement, but the city manager’s employment agreement is clear that Hunt would receive no severance if he left in that manner. Even if the City Council had voted to terminate his contract without cause, his severance package required only 12 months of pay, yet Fontana paid him for 18 months through a settlement agreement.

One question has lingered since: What exactly was the city settling?

The full extent of Hunt’s payout was not widely known until July 2021, when the state controller’s public pay database ranked the former city manager as the highest salaried city employee in 2020. Yet, Hunt had left City Hall in July 2019 and did not work a single day in Fontana the following year.

The settlement agreement called for Hunt to be placed on paid leave effective July 12, 2019, and stipulated that he would “not report to the Employer’s facilities or perform any duties or act on behalf of the Employer in any capacity.” The paid leave continued until his official resignation on Jan. 31, 2020. Once he resigned, the city had to pay him 12 months of his base pay, plus a longevity bonus, and continue to offer him health benefits for at least a year unless he found other work. The terms allowed Hunt to reach 30 years of public service.

In total, the city paid $1,127,378 to Hunt as part of the settlement, but so far, city leadership has never said why and continues to fight efforts to ascertain the reason.

In exchange, Hunt waived his rights to any potential claim against the city, agreed not to defame the City Council and stated he would not share his “subjective opinion relating to the (settlement) negotiations, the terms of this agreement, or his prior employment.”

**Privacy concerns**

In July, Fontana spokesperson Monique Carter suggested the City Council opted to settle with Hunt to avoid litigation, though she would not say what the litigation was and deferred questions to the city’s attorneys.

“The Fontana City Council met in closed session on July 9, 2019 to discuss significant exposure to litigation (Hunt),” Carter wrote in an email. “At this time, the City Council unanimously authorized the City Attorney to negotiate a settlement with Hunt. There was no reportable action from this Closed Session as a settlement was not signed that evening.”
Since then, attorneys working for the city have acknowledged the existence of a record that details the closed session meeting in which Hunt’s settlement was approved, but they have refused to release it, alleging that it would “constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.” The city did not have records of any complaints filed by Hunt to suggest he had a claim against the city.

The attorneys, however, did state that the city was withholding at least one complaint against Hunt for privacy reasons. State law requires the release of complaints if there is reason to believe the allegations are nontrivial. In an email, one of the city’s attorneys stated she did “believe that standard applied here.”

One attorney suggested the matter may have been performance related. Council agendas listed three performance evaluations for the city manager from February 2019 to June 2019.

In a brief interview, Hunt declined to explain the settlement. He denied the city had a reason to terminate his employment.

“I have never received a negative formal performance evaluation, nor am I aware of any complaints against me,” he said.

If the city had terminated Hunt, per his contract, it would have been required to provide him with a written notice with the reason 30 days in advance and given him an opportunity for a hearing. The settlement waived the need for either.

Mayor Warren did not return a request for comment.

**Meeting violated Brown Act**

In exchanges with the Southern California News Group, Fontana’s attorneys admitted the closed session in which Hunt’s settlement was approved had been listed improperly on the agenda, seemingly in violation of California’s open meeting law, the Brown Act. State law would have required the city to publicly disclose the known “facts and circumstances” of the potential litigation based on the listed agenda item.

Instead, Fontana’s attorneys said the correct justification for the closed session discussions was one in which “the facts and circumstances might result in litigation against the local agency, but which the local agency believes are not yet known to a potential plaintiff or plaintiffs,” an exemption in which a public agency does not have to disclose any details.
The incorrect listing would have allowed someone to challenge — and potentially void the settlement agreement with Hunt — had the statute of limitations not already run out, according to Kelly Aviles, an attorney specializing in open government law and the general counsel for Californians Aware, a nonprofit advocating for government accountability.

Aviles successfully litigated a similar case against Pasadena City College, in which a court overturned a settlement agreement with a former president because it had not been properly agendized and was not publicly approved.

“It sounds to me like they violated the Brown Act and are now trying to cover their tracks, because releasing any information about why they entered closed session is only going to confirm they did not do it by the book,” Aviles said. “It doesn’t seem like a mistake, it seems like it was an intentional way to not alert the public to what was going on.”

Best, Best and Krieger, the city’s law firm, cited the Pasadena City College in a warning about potential Brown Act violations in a blog post on its website.

If the city was negotiating a settlement with Hunt, it would be hard to argue that he was unaware, according to Aviles.

“I’ve never in my entire career seen a case where that actually is accurate,” Aviles said. “I have seen it claimed repeatedly and each time it turns out that it was not actually true.

“This doesn’t seem like it was a mistake. It seems like it was an intentional way to not alert the public to what was going on,” she said.

Taxpayers are entitled to information that explains why the city spent public dollars on this, she said.

“It’s not just the city’s money to do with what they want in secret,” Aviles said. “They get to make the decisions, but they’re accountable and you can’t be accountable if you don’t have to tell anybody what you did and why.”

Mass emails warned about ‘rumors’

Emails released through a public records request showed that city’s department heads tried to reassure staff and to cut off any rumor mongering about the departure.
A day before the settlement was executed in July 2019, Police Chief Billy Green and Human Resources Director Rakhesha Thomas sent out similarly worded mass emails to their respective employees about Hunt’s impending exit. Thomas warned staff to keep matters confidential and professional “as rumors will spread like wild flowers.”

“We all know that individuals will fill in the blanks of the unknown,” Thomas wrote. “I ask that our department refrain from such messaging.”

Green urged his officers to “focus our efforts on the issues we have influence over rather than wasting time on those we don’t.”

“As is in the case with any change this significant, rumors will fly on various social media platforms, unproductive water cooler conversations will take place, and potential newspaper stories, all of which are perpetuated by people choosing to a create a narrative that is satisfying to their own interest,” Green wrote. “The Fontana Police Department will not be a party to any such messaging.”

Hunt was well-liked and served as city manager for 20 years. Since his exit, the position has changed hands three times in less than three years. The city hired Michael Milhiser as interim city manager days after Hunt’s departure. City Manager Mark Denny then took over from Milhiser on a more permanent basis in April 2020, but then resigned 18 months later in October 2021 to take a private sector job. His agreement was not set to expire until April 2025.

Former Baldwin Park City Manager Shannon Yauchzee is now serving in the role on an interim basis while the city conducts a search for its next leader.

Last year, San Bernardino County Supervisor Janice Rutherford hired Hunt to serve as her chief of staff.
Report says Fontana is not a 'fun' city

By RUSSELL INGOLD
Jan 13, 2022

A Selena tribute band performs at the Fontana Hispanic Heritage Month Celebration at Miller Park in 2021. Despite this event and many others organized by the Community Services Department, Fontana is not considered a “fun” city, according to a report by WalletHub. (Herald News photo by Russell Ingold)

Is there a lot of “fun” in Fontana? Many residents say yes, but a new national report says: Not really.

WalletHub, a personal finance website, put together a list of the “Most Fun Cities in America,” and Fontana ranked near the very bottom, alongside some other Inland Empire communities.
WalletHub compared 182 cities — including the 150 most populated U.S. cities, plus at least two of the most populated cities in each state — across three key dimensions: 1) Entertainment and Recreation, 2) Nightlife and Parties and 3) Costs.

Fontana was rated No. 177, meaning it was supposedly one of the least “fun” large cities in the nation, ahead of only Moreno Valley (No. 178), Ontario (179), Oxnard (180), Brownsville, TX (181), and Pearl City, HI (182). Rancho Cucamonga was a little bit ahead of Fontana at No. 173.

Not surprisingly, Las Vegas, NV was No. 1, followed by other major entertainment hot spots such as Orlando, FL, Atlanta, GA, Miami, FL, New Orleans, LA, and San Francisco.

The list was designed to help Americans find the cities with the “greatest number and variety of fun yet cost-effective options,” based on 65 key metrics that range from fitness centers per capita to movie costs to average open hours of breweries, WalletHub said in a news release.

Fontana was described as one of the cities with the fewest restaurants per capita (No. 178). This is an apparent reference to the relatively small number of sit-down restaurants (a situation which many residents have complained about for years), as opposed to fast-food eateries, which have never been in short supply.

Jill Gonzalez, an analyst with WalletHub, said that some of the main reasons for Fontana’s poor rating were “the small number of attractions, restaurants, fitness centers, movie theaters and performing arts theaters, the lack of diversity in restaurants and the lack of shopping centers. Other areas where Fontana ranked low include bar accessibility and the number of arts and crafts supplies establishments per capita.”

Still, defenders of Fontana would point to the presence of the city’s modern performing arts venue (Center Stage Theater) and its numerous city-operated community centers, which offer “fun” activities for residents of all ages on a regular basis. The city also has numerous sports facilities, including the new Central City Park.

And of course, Fontana is home to Auto Club Speedway, which hosts NASCAR auto races and also has been the site of some huge concerts in recent years (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic). However, the WalletHub study only took into consideration venues which were within the city limits, and the speedway is located in the unincorporated San Bernardino County area.
One rather surprising aspect of the WalletHub study was its determination that Fontana’s “costs” — including average food price and movie cost — were quite high. Fontana was ranked No. 164 in the Costs category, indicating that its entertainment costs were higher than even in a city such as Los Angeles (which was No. 159). However, a regular movie ticket at the Regency Fontana 8 is $8.50, which would seem to be a great bargain compared to most theaters in L.A.

Nevertheless, Gonzalez provided this explanation:

“Costs only made up 20 percent of the overall score, and Fontana ranked particularly low for bowling costs: $24.56, compared to $21.33 in Los Angeles. We also found that the price for a three star hotel room in Fontana was $148, much higher than in Los Angeles where it was $92 for the time period we researched, which was late November.”

Fontana was also No. 181 in the Entertainment and Recreation category and No. 163 in the Nightlife and Parties category.

Overall in the WalletHub report, San Diego was Southern California’s highest-rated “fun” city at No. 16 and L.A. was No. 21.

Other Southern California cities were Anaheim (No. 89), Bakersfield (94), Long Beach (97), Irvine (100), Garden Grove (105), Huntington Beach (106), Riverside (135), and San Bernardino (146).

To view the entire report, visit:

Authorities continue to crack down on dozens of illegal marijuana cultivations, including one in Fontana

Jan 17, 2022

This was one of the illegal marijuana cultivations that was shut down by authorities in San Bernardino County recently as part of Operation Hammer Strike. (Contributed photo by San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department)

Authorities are continuing to crack down on illegal marijuana cultivations in several cities in San Bernardino County at the start of the New Year, and one of the locations was in Fontana, according to the Sheriff's Department.
During Week 19 of Operation Hammer Strike (Jan. 3-9), investigators and deputies served 31 search warrants at various locations, including one in the 16000 block of Maestro Way in Fontana.

Other locations were in Lucerne Valley, Morongo Valley, Yucca Valley, Twentynine Palms, Adelanto, Hesperia, Pinon Hills, Phelan, Victorville, Newberry Springs, El Mirage, Upland, and El Monte.

During that week, investigators arrested 15 suspects and seized a total of 12,370 marijuana plants, 3,361.7 pounds of processed marijuana, eight guns, 92.5 pounds of Psilocybin mushrooms, and more than $55,000 in cash. Investigators eradicated a total of 122 greenhouses found at these locations, as well as 12 indoor locations. Investigators mitigated one electrical bypass and recovered one stolen recreational vehicle.

----- THEN IN WEEK 20 of the ongoing operation (Jan. 10-16), investigators served 18 search warrants at locations in Lucerne Valley, Wonder Valley, Adelanto, Hesperia, Twentynine Palms, and Helendale.

During that week, Sheriff’s personnel located and arrested 15 suspects. Investigators seized 7,095 marijuana plants, 5,045.5 pounds of processed marijuana, 11 guns, 1,583 grams of concentrated marijuana, and more than $5,600 in cash. Investigators eradicated a total of 63 greenhouses found at these locations, as well as two THC extraction labs. Investigators located one live fragmentation hand grenade, which was destroyed in place by deputies from the Sheriff’s Arson/Bomb Division.
The Family Assistance Program recently received a $1 million donation from the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians for a program to help homeless youth in Victorville.

The money will be used in the expansion of Family Assistance Program's current youth drop-in and community center in Old Town Victorville, on the corner of Sixth and C streets. The expansion will add 20 beds to create an emergency shelter, a commercial kitchen and a tiny home village with 14 tiny homes.

This will be the first tiny home village created exclusively for transitional-age youth who are experiencing homelessness in California, according to a news release.

“I am excited that the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians has recognized the need for youth-specific services and is supporting this innovative project,” Darryl Evey, executive director of Family Assistance Program, said in the news release.

“If we do not end youth homelessness, we will not stop the pipeline of people who have had their childhoods destroyed by housing insecurity. This project will set these young people up for a lifetime of successes,” Evey said.

The project will connect homeless youth with emergency services and other transitional programs that include wraparound care.

Family Assistance Program is currently providing homeless youth services through its youth drop-in centers, youth shelters and transitional homes. This project will provide housing to anyone age 18 to 24 who is experiencing homelessness.

“We are deeply honored to support the Family Assistance Program and their first-ever tiny home village to help combat homelessness for the young adults impacted in Victorville,” Ken Ramirez, chairman of the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, said in the news release.

“Our youth are the future and no young adult should ever have to experience not having a roof over their head. Investing in infrastructure that will provide future generations with the necessary resources to thrive is a top priority for San Manuel.”

For information about Family Assistance Program and how to help, go to familyassist.org or email Angela Sorrell at angela@familyassist.org.
San Bernardino could slash mayor’s salary to align with duties of position

Any change in compensation would not take effect until the beginning of a new term in December

By BRIAN WHITEHEAD | bwhitehead@scng.com | The Sun
PUBLISHED: January 17, 2022 at 4:14 p.m. | UPDATED: January 17, 2022 at 4:19 p.m.

The mayor of San Bernardino could make significantly less money next year should the City Council decide Wednesday, Jan. 19, to align the position’s salary with compensation offered to other top elected officials with similar responsibilities in the region.

City law presently sets the mayor’s yearly pay at 50% of that of a San Bernardino County Superior Court judge – subject to annual adjustments each January.

Only eight mayors in the state made more than Mayor John Valdivia in 2020, with a $115,561 salary and benefits bringing his total compensation to north of $143,000, according to the website Government Compensation in California.

City leaders have said that is too much given the position’s reduced responsibilities under a council-manager form of government where the seven-member council sets policy for the city manager to carry out.

Adelanto, Big Bear Lake, Loma Linda, Needles and Victorville are the only other San Bernardino County cities with such a governing structure, and on average, pay their mayor $7,760 a year, according to a staff report prepared for Wednesday’s City Council meeting.

Furthermore, the salaries for mayor are substantially less annually than the median household income in those respective cities. The mayors also represent far fewer residents.

San Bernardino, meanwhile, with a population greater than 220,000, pays its top elected official nearly three times the city’s $46,000 median household income.

San Bernardino Councilwoman Kimberly Calvin last month called the mayor’s total compensation package “atrocious.”

With 315,000 residents and a council-manager form of government, Riverside pays its independently-elected mayor about $83,000 a year, only slightly more than the $69,045 median household income there, according to the staff report.

Any change to the mayor’s compensation in San Bernardino would not take effect until the beginning of a new term in December.

The City Council meets at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Feldheym Library, 555 W. Sixth St., San Bernardino.
What’s new: Section 8 apartments in San Bernardino sell for $7 million; seminary college moves to Rancho Cucamonga

The buyer plans on keeping it low-income housing, said CBRE broker Cray Carlson, who represented the seller.

A 44-unit apartment complex rented to Section 8 tenants in San Bernardino has sold for $7 million or roughly $159,000 per unit. (Courtesy of CBRE)

By SAMANTHA GOWEN | sgowen@scng.com | Orange County Register

PUBLISHED: January 17, 2022 at 8:58 a.m. | UPDATED: January 18, 2022 at 7:04 a.m.
A 44-unit apartment complex rented to Section 8 tenants in San Bernardino has sold for $7 million or roughly $159,000 per unit, according to CBRE.

The brokerage said the Arrowhead Apartments complex was formerly leased under a contract with the county under the Housing Choice Voucher Program.

“The county opted out of the contract, and the buyer purchased the property with 100 percent Section 8 tenants,” said Cray Carlson with CBRE. “There is a huge need for affordable apartments in San Bernardino, and the buyer plans on keeping it low-income housing.”

The buyer and seller were not identified by CBRE.

The complex at 3943 N H St. includes all one-bedroom, one-bathroom units. It was built in 1973 and got extensive renovation in 2014 and early 2015, including exterior paint, new carports, and interior unit features.

A 139,000-square-foot, industrial building at 10220 San Sevaine Way in Jurupa Valley has been leased for 120 months by The Cary Co., according to Avison Young. Terms of the lease were not disclosed by the brokerage, which represented the property owner, San Diego-based Stos Partners. (Courtesy of Avison Young)

**JV warehouse leased to expanding Cary Co.**
A 139,000-square-foot, industrial building at 10220 San Sevaine Way in Jurupa Valley has been leased for 120 months by The Cary Co., according to Avison Young.

The company, which makes containers, warehouse supplies, spill control products and filtration solutions, will expand its manufacturing operations in this spring to the facility, relocating from a smaller, 30,000-square-foot location, also in Jurupa Valley.

Terms of the lease were not disclosed by the brokerage, which represented the property owner, San Diego-based Stos Partners.

Cary Co., based in Addison, Illinois, was represented by John Boyer of NAI Capital.

Seminary shifts to RC from Claremont

After 11 years in Claremont, Wagner University, an online seminary school, has moved to Rancho Cucamonga after partnering with Shiloh University. The Protestant seminary school said it made the move, converting a house to office space at 6718 Etiwanda Ave., with hopes its presence would attract new nonprofits and businesses “making a difference locally and globally.”
“We’re an online seminary with a global presence so though our students don’t come to Rancho Cucamonga on a daily basis, all of our operations are located locally here and we truly enjoy being a part of the Rancho Cucamonga community,” said Wagner Vice Chancellor Benny Yang.

The school was established in 1998, first based in Colorado, followed by a move to Claremont in 2010.

A representative with Wagner University said the office staff of 10 all shifted to Rancho Cucamonga.

The indoor Fit Body Boot Camp has reopened in Norco under new ownership.

The gym is owned and operated by friends Camille Ricupito and Maricela Castro who met at a Fit Body Boot Camp in Corona and decided to re-open Norco’s location.

For more information, go to fitbodybootcamp.com/12275-norco-ca/ or call 951-703-3913.

The gym is located at 3230 Hamner Ave. #404
Dentistry office opens in Menifee

Western Dental & Orthodontics has opened in Menifee, part of an expansion that has added 55 new offices in recent months in five states.

Services include general dentistry, orthodontics, oral surgery, dental implants and oral hygiene.

In addition to privately insured patients, the company treats adults and children in the Medi-Cal Dental program known as Denti-Cal.

Address: 27291 Newport Road
What's new: Section 8 apartments in San Bernardino sell for $7 million; seminary college moves to Rancho Cucamonga…

Fresh juice, bowls in Palmdale

Juice It Up! has opened in the Tierra Subida Center in Palmdale.

The franchise operated by brothers Moe and Sam Abukamleh sells smoothies, açaí bowl and raw juice.

Address: 38709 Tierra Subida Ave.; phone: 661-724-8064.

A 3.32-acre parcel in Hemet has sold for $1.73 million and will be developed into a gas station, car wash and drive-through restaurant. (Courtesy of Progressive Real Estate Partners)
**New gas station coming to Hemet**

A 3.32-acre parcel in Hemet has sold for $1,735,000 and will be developed into a gas station, car wash and drive-through restaurant, according to Progressive Real Estate Partners.

A timeline for the new business at the northeast corner of Florida Avenue and Soboba Avenue was not provided.

The buyer was Sater Hemer LLC, which has developed other gas station properties in the region, according to Progressive.

**SB housing authority lands HUD grant**

The Family Self-Sufficiency program at the Housing Authority of the County of San Bernardino has received $338,091, U.S. Rep. Pete Aguilar’s office says.

The grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development will provide local families with resources to become homeowners and work on career development and higher education goals.

The grant will support three HACSB specialists who will work with people and families participating in the agency’s FSS program, according to George Silva, a manager for the FSS program.

The program’s goal is to help families learn how to increase their income and reduce or eliminate the need for government assistance. Silva said four families graduated from the FSS program in 2021, with an average savings balance of $12,000.

*The business briefs are compiled and edited by Business Editor Samantha Gowen. Submit items to sgowen@scng.com. High-resolution images also can be submitted. Allow at least one week for publication. Items are edited for length and clarity.*
San Diego County Sheriff’s Department encrypts radio communications; lack of transparency decried
The San Diego County Sheriff's Department has encrypted its radio communications, blocking the public from listening to information about safety matters in real time.

The department is the latest law enforcement agency in the county and state to cut off access to radio communications in response to a California Department of Justice mandate that required agencies to protect certain personal information that law enforcement personnel obtain from state databases. Such information — names, driver’s license numbers, dates of birth and other information from the California Law Enforcement Telecommunications System, or CLETS — sometimes is broadcast over police radios.

The October 2020 mandate gave agencies two options: to limit the transmission of database-obtained personal information on public channels or to encrypt their radio traffic.

Police reform advocates say the switch to encrypted channels is problematic. The radio silence, they say, will force members of the public, including the news media, to rely on law enforcement agencies’ discretion in releasing information about public safety matters.

“What this does, it inhibits transparency and accountability,” said Yusef Miller, of the North County Equity and Justice Coalition and the Racial Justice Coalition of San Diego.

“We as the community need to have transparency with law enforcement — where things are happening in our community, where people are being stopped and pulled over,” Miller said at a news conference Friday morning.

A sheriff’s spokesperson has said the department is exploring ways to disseminate information about incidents as they unfold. One idea is an online page that would show information about calls to which deputies respond.
In San Diego County, the only policing agency that said it did not plan to fully encrypt its radio communications was the San Diego Police Department, which uses unencrypted dispatch channels as well as separate, encrypted channels through which personal information can be shared privately.

Police officers sometimes run background checks on their own, using their department-issued cellphones or computers in their patrol vehicles. Other times, they ask dispatchers to pull the information from the databases. That’s usually when personal information is broadcast over radio traffic.

The sheriff’s department made the switch to encrypted channels Tuesday. Lt. Amber Baggs, a spokesperson, said full encryption was the better option for the department to comply with the Department of Justice order.

“It’s not always feasible for us to switch channels,” Baggs said, adding that it could be “difficult or sometimes impossible” for deputies to switch from an unencrypted to an encrypted channel to protect personal information, especially in situations that unfold quickly.

Officials from several police departments across the county took a similar stance in explaining their switch to encryption to the Union-Tribune in July. Some agencies said it wasn’t feasible for their dispatchers to manage both unencrypted and encrypted channels.

CALIFORNIA

Gov. Newsom approves sweeping reforms to law enforcement in California

Sept. 30, 2021

For years, anyone with a scanner has had the ability to tune into the unencrypted radio communications, more so in recent years with the advent of web and cellphone scanner apps.

Miller, from the Racial Justice Coalition of San Diego, said Friday outside sheriff’s department headquarters that the move to full encryption of radio communications runs contrary to the current demand for more transparency from law enforcement agencies.

“We need this type of access for trust and transparency’s sake,” he said. “We cannot wait for law enforcement to inform us of things that are happening in our community. Police shootings, any active shooter, rapes, thefts — these directly impact our families, and we need to know and be ahead of what going on.”

Miller noted that he was not advocating for access to the personal data of people being investigated by the sheriff’s department or other law enforcement agencies.

Darwin Fishman, who has served on the city of San Diego’s Community Review Board on Police Practices, criticized the sheriff’s department’s record on transparency and said full encryption of radio communication is the “wrong way to move into this era.”
"[For] folks that are doing formal cop watch or people that are simply listening in and seeing about whether it’s fires or something in their apartment building, some kind of police action, [full encryption] really can have a significant impact," Fishman said.

One person who often listens to radio scanner traffic is Imperial Beach resident Marcus Boyd. He said he regularly video records encounters between law enforcement officers and the public — he views it as a way to hold officers accountable — and sometimes relies on scanner traffic to accomplish the task.

“Now all we have is silence,” Boyd said in a recent interview. He also spoke at the Friday news conference.

Boyd pointed to state laws enacted in recent years that aim to increase transparency, and faulted the Department of Justice for crafting an order that slows that progress.

“That [momentum] gave us one step forward,” he said, “and [agencies] are taking two steps back.”

He added, “This is giving them the ability to hide.”

Boyd, a former database programmer, has built his own tool: CopWatcher, a cellphone app with a variety of features, including a database with publicly available information about San Diego police officers and county sheriff’s deputies, including hiring dates and salaries. He said the app, which is in a testing phase, will allow users to write reviews for officers and deputies and file complaints with the appropriate entities. It will also allow users to make a note of police activity, allowing “cop watchers” to respond, Boyd said.

The move toward encryption hasn’t generated much public outcry, and Boyd said he thinks that’s because many people aren’t aware that scanner traffic had been publicly available.

*San Diego Union-Tribune editor Dana Littlefield contributed to this report.*
BARSTOW, Calif. – The Bureau of Land Management will implement a temporary closure of public lands in the Johnson Valley Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) Recreation Area in San Bernardino County Jan. 29 – Feb. 5. The temporary closure will enhance public and participant safety during the 2022 King of the Hammers desert race events, which are authorized by a BLM Special Recreation Permit.

The San Bernardino County Public Health Department approved COVID-19 safety measures for the event and determined the safety measures go above the current state recommendations. The public is asked to cooperate with race officials and local law enforcement to help spectators and participants stay safe and ensure the success of the off-road races.

A minimum of three staging areas within the Johnson Valley OHV Recreation Area will remain open to the public for both weekends of the temporary closure period. Registered race spectators, participants, and race officials are exempt from the closure.
Second Podium Sweep for Can-Am at King of the Hammers

All-Yellow Podium at King of the Hammers: Second Victory and Podium Sweep in a Row for Can-Am at the World’s Toughest Race

Information and a map of the closure area for the 2022 race event will be posted for viewing at the BLM’s California Desert District Office and Barstow Field Office. Download a map of the closure here.

The BLM encourages the public to recreate responsibly on public lands and to take precautions to reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19. Stay local, plan ahead, practice safe social distancing and wear a mask when social distancing is not possible. Find additional tips for recreating responsibly on public lands here.

As stewards, the BLM manages public lands for the benefit of current and future generations, supporting conservation in pursuit of its multiple-use mission. For more information, contact the California Desert District Office at 760-833-7100 or the Barstow Field Office at 760-252-6000.

The BLM manages more than 245 million acres of public land located primarily in 12 western states, including Alaska, on behalf of the American people. The BLM also administers 700 million acres of subsurface mineral estate throughout the nation. Our mission is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of America’s public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

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JON CROWLEY

YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE
A California City Is Overrun by Crows. Could a Laser Be the Answer?

In a move befitting its Silicon Valley setting, the city of Sunnyvale, Calif., will aim a laser at 1,000 birds that have overwhelmed the downtown area during the pandemic.

By Alyssa Lukpat
Jan. 17, 2022

The downtown of Sunnyvale, Calif., has been bustling since the coronavirus pandemic started. More than a thousand visitors have enjoyed a night on the town practically every evening for almost two years.

But they do not come to slurp ramen or drink beer at the gastro pub. They eat whatever scraps they can find outside. Then they defecate all over the sidewalks.

They are the unwelcome guests nobody invited: crows. And now the city is turning to an unlikely weapon to disperse them: lasers.

The city authorities have struggled to get rid of the birds for at least the past five years, but the situation became dire during the pandemic, when the crow population mushroomed, said Larry Klein, the mayor of Sunnyvale.

“The streets are basically riddled with crow poo,” he said on Sunday.

It is not just the streets that are overwhelmed in Sunnyvale, which is about 40 miles southeast of San Francisco. Crows have sometimes dropped sticks or leaves or feces onto outdoor diners, Mr. Klein said.

In an effort to disperse the birds, the city this month will turn to a tool befitting its Silicon Valley setting: a $20 laser. The city authorities already tried chasing the crows away with a falcon, but they had only “limited success,” the mayor said.

It may sound like a futuristic solution but lasers have been proved to scare away crows. In New York State, Rochester and Auburn have used lasers to repel the birds with some success.

For three weeks, Sunnyvale employees will spend an hour every evening shining a green laser at crows, Mr. Klein said. They will also use a boombox to play sounds of crows in distress.

“The biggest thing is to harass them enough so a large percentage of them find new homes,” Mr. Klein said.

The crows gather downtown around dusk, after they have spent the day foraging for food.

When crows see a green laser shining in the trees at night, they think animals are running over the branches, said Kevin J. McGowan, an ornithologist at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in Ithaca, N.Y. They will fly somewhere else to sleep.

But crow dispersal is a tricky game, because some of the birds do not want to leave a place where they have already settled, said Dr. McGowan, who has studied crows for more than 30 years.

He suggested that the Sunnyvale authorities also aim firecrackers and bottle rockets at the birds, which will make them “freak out,” he said.
Even after all that effort, the crows may not want to leave, Dr. McGowan said. He cited an example in Auburn, where the authorities in the 1990s relocated around 75,000 crows to less crowded areas. But they still gather in parts of the city.

“They’re like teenagers and Covid,” he said. “You can’t stop them getting together.”

However, not everyone supports Sunnyvale’s laser plans. Mr. Klein said that the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, a local environmental group, believes the laser has the potential to harm the birds.

Compared with flocks in other cities, Sunnyvale's 1,000 crows are “a moderate roost,” said Kaeli Swift, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Washington who has studied crows.

Cities across the country have contended with rising crow populations over the past few years, but such influxes have nothing to do with how the pandemic has emptied the streets, Dr. Swift said.

“Roosts move around — we don’t exactly know why,” she said, adding that roosts grow larger in the winter, when crows migrate from Canada.

It appears that the crows may never totally vacate Sunnyvale. The only methods that could get rid of all of them are illegal, such as blasting crows with dynamite, as the Illinois authorities did in 1940 when they killed more than 300,000 birds.

Despite the growing numbers of crows, Sunnyvale's human residents do not need to worry about their health, Dr. McGowan said.

“You’d have to lick all the crow droppings on a park bench to come even remotely close to catching something from a crow roost,” he said.
Native Americans want to ditch the name Squaw Valley. A county supervisor says context matters.
As white settlers made their way west, so did the word “squaw.”

Eventually, it took root in nearly 100 California place names, possibly more — Squaw Creek, Squaw Peak, Squaw Hollow, Squaw Flat.

For a historic ski resort that hosted the 1960 Winter Olympics and was once known as Squaw Valley, the reckoning came last year. Visitors are now greeted by signs welcoming them to Palisades Tahoe.
In another Squaw Valley — a landscape of rolling hills about halfway between Fresno and Kings Canyon National Park — the debate over whether to adopt a new name has pitted Native American activists against a white county supervisor.

At the heart of the battle is what “squaw” means and who decides whether it’s offensive.

Roman Rain Tree, a member of the Dunlap Band of Mono Indians, is leading a campaign to change the name of the land where his ancestors lived for generations from Squaw Valley to Nuum Valley.

Nuum means “the people” in the Western Mono language.

Fresno County Supervisor Nathan Magsig, who moved to the area from Orange County as a teenager, accuses Rain Tree and some of his supporters of being “outsiders.”

To Rain Tree, 30, who lives about half an hour away in Fresno, “squaw” is an ugly profanity for vagina.
“When people say, ‘Well, you don’t live here’ and get offended, I say, ‘But you’re living on stolen land,’” he said.

Magsig argues that there shouldn’t be a blanket prohibition on the word.

“What makes something hateful is the context and how the person’s heart is, who’s making those statements,” Magsig said, adding that it was important to understand the historical origin of the name.

Some scholars believe “squaw” came from the Algonquin language, which was spoken by many tribes on the East Coast and originally meant “woman.”

A view of the Squaw Valley area in Central California, where an effort is underway to change the name to Nuum Valley. (Gary Coronado / Los Angeles Times)
But in European languages, the word morphed into something darker. It eventually spread to western areas where Indigenous tribes spoke languages unrelated to Algonquin.

Suzan Shown Harjo, president of the Morning Star Institute and a leading Native American rights advocate, said “squaw” was popularized by French and British trappers, who conscripted Indigenous women as slave laborers as early as the 1600s.

“They were calling them ‘vaginas,’ and they were calling them worse,” said Harjo, who has been involved with the fight to change offensive names since the 1960s.

Montana, Oregon, Maine and Minnesota are among the states that have outlawed “squaw” in place names.

Six proposals to replace “squaw” are listed by the California Advisory Committee on Geographic Names, including Damalusung Lake for Squaw Lake and Paac Kūvįhų’k for Squaw Tank.

In November, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, who is Native American, declared the term “squaw” to be derogatory and established a task force to find replacement names for places on federal land.

There are more than 650 places on federal land that contain the term, according to a database maintained by the Board on Geographic Names.

“The term has historically been used as an offensive ethnic, racial and sexist slur, particularly for Indigenous women,” the department said in a news release.

The earliest documented appearance of the name “Squaw Valley” in Fresno County dates to Aug. 8, 1871, when the Squaw Valley School District was created, according to a report compiled by Fresno library staff.
Native Americans want to ditch the name Squaw Valley. A county supervisor says context matters - Los Angeles Times

The report cites an account that the name was inspired by an imprint shaped like a woman’s moccasin in a granite rock pointing toward the valley.

A “Welcome to Squaw Valley” sign along State Route 180. The earliest documented appearance of “squaw” in Fresno County dates to Aug. 8, 1871. (Gary Coronado / Los Angeles Times)

Another story claims that two hunters bestowed the name in 1851 after finding only women and children in the valley, with the men having gone off to war.

For the ski resort formerly known as Squaw Valley, one origin story recorded in a newspaper article cites the murder of an Indigenous woman.

Today, the Squaw Valley in Fresno County numbers about 3,600 residents.

Rain Tree, who also has ties to the Choinumni tribe, spent summers as a child at his grandparents’ home there.
As an adult, Rain Tree recorded his grandfather speaking the Mono language.

At first, the older man spoke haltingly. He had been forced to attend a boarding school where his native tongue was forbidden. But soon, the words came back, in fluid sentences.

Rain Tree was born and raised in Fresno. But his mother, Gina Charley, told him the valley was part of his DNA. When she was pregnant with him, she ate sour berries and acorns grown there.

Rain Tree is a tribal liaison for Seeds of Sovereignty, a company he co-founded with his wife to assist members of tribes that, like his, lack federal recognition.
As a leader of the coalition Rename S-Valley Fresno County, Rain Tree has held virtual town halls and gathered more than 35,000 signatures on an online petition. The ACLU is among the national advocacy groups expressing support.

In a photo on the coalition’s website, Rain Tree stands in front of a backdrop of tree-studded brown hills.

Beside him is his daughter Lola, then 10, who holds a sign reading, “I am not a squaw.”

Earlier this month, Rain Tree and the coalition submitted an application for the name change with the federal government.

In addition to Nuum Valley, Bear Mountain Valley and Yokutch Valley are possible replacement names.

Magsig is not the only local leader with reservations about the name change.

Fresno County Supervisor Ernest “Buddy” Mendes, who represents southwestern portions of the county, said “virtually nobody” in the valley is calling for a name change.

He said, using an expletive, that he doesn’t care what the Interior secretary thinks. All of Rain Tree’s support, he said, is from outside the area.

Local residents are “wondering why somebody from the outside wants to change the name,” he said.

Not everyone in Rain Tree’s tribe, which has about 125 members and has been fighting for federal recognition for decades, has signed on to the name change, either.
The lack of consensus on the tribal council stems from an acceptance of “the local hierarchy” — and a belief that people mean well despite the language they might employ, said Shirley Guevara, vice chair of the Dunlap Band of Mono Indians.

Guevara, 71, said she personally supports the name change, “as an elder and a woman.”

“Squaw Valley” reminds her of old western TV shows in which Native Americans — especially women — were treated poorly.

“Squaws were worse than dogs — [who] could be used and traded, and killed and shot,” said Guevara, who lives in neighboring Dunlap.
Guevara highlighted high rates of violence against Indigenous women in the U.S. and Canada, an issue also cited by other proponents of the name change.

Taweah Garcia, Guevera’s daughter, said the persistence of the term in place names encourages racism against Native American women.

“I get very emotional, because this is not just for us,” said Garcia, 45. “We’re doing this for our ancestors. We’re doing this for future generations.”

Without buy-in from local officials, changing the name could be an uphill battle.

The federal Board on Geographic Names, which could take up to a year to make a decision, will solicit recommendations from the Fresno County Board of Supervisors and the California Advisory Committee on Geographic Names, as well as comments from all 574 federally recognized tribes, said Alex Demas, a spokesperson for the U.S. Geological Survey.

The board typically views input from local officials as representing their constituents, Jennifer Runyon, a research staffer for the Board on Geographic Names, said in an email to Rain Tree.
The board is aware of issues the coalition has with county officials, and their input would be just “one factor in the decision,” she wrote.

“Of course, we would much prefer to see local government support,” she added.

Magsig, the county supervisor, said he has called on Rain Tree and his supporters to hold a meeting with valley residents.

Rain Tree wants Magsig to spearhead the meeting, arguing that it’s his job as an elected official and that he has more resources to maintain a COVID-safe environment.

Ben Charley, the tribe’s chairman, said he has reiterated to Magsig that “we do find the name ‘squaw’ as offensive and ugly toward our American Indian females.”
Magsig has said that Interior Secretary Haaland’s declaration about “squaw” is “a mistake” because it is overly broad. He is running for Congress to replace Devin Nunes, a Republican who resigned in January to head a social media company founded by Donald Trump.

“To be fair, he has to take into consideration the will of the residents and businesses before he agrees to the name change,” Charley, who is Rain Tree’s uncle, wrote of Magsig in a Jan. 7 email to tribe members. “And he said the community should be involved with the new name.”

Shortly before his mother died, in 2013, Rain Tree asked her if the tribe would ever gain federal recognition with the name “Squaw Valley” still in place.
She said no and challenged him to do something about it.

“If you think you can change it, then show them the pen is mightier than the sword,” she told him.

There may be other battles to be fought with Rain Tree’s pen. Squaw Lake and Squaw Valley Lake are also in Fresno County.

Lila Seidman covers trending and breaking news for the Los Angeles Times.
Clement teacher jailed on suspicion of molesting a student

Jan 17, 2022

A teacher at Clement Middle School has been arrested on charges of sexually abusing a male student from when he was 12 until was 17.

Joseph Nardella, a 52-year-old resident of Highland, was arrested at 10:50 a.m. Friday, Jan. 14, on charges continuous sexual abuse of minor under the age of 14. He was booked into custody at Central Detention Center in San Bernardino.
Bail was set at $350,000. The Redlands Unified School District has put Nardella on administrative leave.

The boy, now 18, was a student at Clement. After he came forward with the charges, the San Bernardino County Sheriff’s Department’s Specialized Investigations Division, Crimes Against Children Detail investigated.

Nardella’s booking photo is being released, as it is believed there may be additional victims.

Anyone with information regarding this incident is encouraged to contact Deputy Vanayes Quezada at (909) 387-3615. Callers wishing to remain anonymous may visit wetip.com or call the We-Tip Hotline at 1-800-78-CRIME (27463).
An unconscious man was found to be shot to death in San Bernardino early Saturday morning, Jan. 15, the San Bernardino Police Department said.

The man was found by a resident around 4:26 a.m. in the 700 block of North Mt. Vernon Avenue and they called authorities for a welfare check, police said in a Monday statement. Officers found 35-year-old Christopher Lee Swayzer suffering from multiple gunshot wounds and he was pronounced dead at the scene, authorities said.

Detectives were working to identify a suspect in the killing and determine a possible motive, police said.

Anyone with information regarding the incident was asked to contact Detective K. Hernandez at hernandez_ki@sbcity.org or at 909-384-5620.
Woman hoist rescued from Deep Creek Hot Springs

A San Bernardino County Sheriff’s aviation team over the weekend hoist rescued a Los Angeles woman from Deep Creek Hot Springs area south of Apple Valley.

On Saturday, 31-year-old Mary Ann Urdiales went hiking in the Deep Creek Hot Springs area. At around 4:00 p.m., she began hiking back to the parking lot with a friend when she slipped and injured her ankle and could not continue, authorities said.

Urdiales dialed 911 and relayed the information to dispatch. Due to the steep/remote terrain, sheriff’s officials determined a hoist rescue would be needed to get Urdiales out of the area safely, according to sheriff’s officials.

The springs are located in the Deep Creek drainage, east of Hesperia and along the Pacific Crest Trail, the U.S. Forest Service said.

Sheriff’s Rescue Helicopter AR306 was dispatched to the area to assist, and the crew located Urdiales and her friend halfway up the trail, the sheriff’s report said.

The aviation crew lowered a deputy to Urdiales and she was placed in a rescue harness and hoisted up to the helicopter as it hovered above the trail.

The crew then hoisted the deputy back up and Urdiales was flown to awaiting medics for further treatment regarding her injury, the sheriff’s report said.

The aviation rescue team consisted of Pilot Corporal Ryan Peppler, Crew Chief Reserve Deputy Wayne Hess and Hoist Rider Deputy Cody Korkotsakis.

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