

Local & State

THE VIRUS CRISIS

Florida reports 7,391 new COVID cases

BY DAVID J. NEAL
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Two days after COVID-19 testing sites were shut down for Christmas Day, Florida's COVID-19 dashboard reported 7,391 new cases, the fewest since Nov. 30.

The state's positive test rate rose, however, while current hospitalizations rocketed upward.

Being between the Christmas and New Year's holidays as well as a Sun-

day, normally a day of lower cases than the rest of the week, there's no surprise the case numbers dropped to the lowest since the Monday after the Thanksgiving holiday. After the 6,659 reported that day, the daily case count dipped below 8,000 only twice before Sunday.

Along with 77 new deaths reported, all residents, Florida's pandemic totals stand at 1,271,979 cases, 21,212 resident deaths and 21,514 total deaths.

The positive test rate reported for Saturday, on only 65,939 tests, was 9.69%, the highest since Dec. 14. But the average daily positive test rate slid to 8.50 for the last seven days reported from 8.85 for the previous seven days reported.

CONFIRMED COVID-19 CASES IN SOUTH FLORIDA

Miami-Dade County reported 1,644 more people who tested positive and 23 more COVID-19 deaths,

putting its pandemic totals at 288,306 cases and 4,150 deaths. The positive test rate on Saturday was 9.73% and 9.45 on Friday, both on light returns of test results. But, for the week, the state's county-by-county breakdown says the average daily positive test rate skidded from 8.87% for Dec. 13 through Dec. 19 to 8.19% for Dec. 20 through Saturday.

● **Broward County** reported another 704 cases and six deaths, moving its totals to 132,897 cases and 1,817 deaths. Broward's average daily positive test rate dropped from 7.40% for Dec. 13 through Dec. 19 to 6.59% from Dec. 20 through Saturday. The positive test rate was 8.68% on Saturday.

● **Palm Beach County** reported 409 new cases

(80,239 for the pandemic), but zero deaths (1,860). And the average daily positive test rate dropped to 6.86% for the last seven days from 7.28% for the previous seven days. Saturday's positive rate was 7.29%

● **Monroe County** reported 16 new cases and one new death. Pandemic totals in the Keys are 4,153 cases and 34 deaths.

CURRENT HOSPITALIZATIONS

Government officials use current hospitalizations to decide the next action in dealing with the pandemic. On the state level, this has been steadily falling over the last month.

The Florida Agency for Health Care Administration reports the number of patients hospitalized statewide with a "primary

diagnosis of COVID." The data, which is updated at least every hour, does not distinguish between the number of COVID-19 patients in hospital intensive care units and those in acute-care beds, which require less attention from nurses.

As of 11 a.m. Sunday, the AHCA said there were 6,367 people currently hospitalized, a gargantuan jump of 731 from 11 a.m. Saturday and an increase of 1,131 (or 21.6%) from a week ago. Compared to Saturday, Miami-Dade was up 21 to 992; Broward was down 13 to 530; Palm Beach was up 17 to 312; and Monroe remained the same at two.

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Javoun Garrick and his mother, Geneive Hall, at their home in Opa-locka.

WISH BOOK

He's blind and about to age out of his special-needs program. Here's how you can help

BY ALEX HARRIS
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The pandemic ruined Geneive Hall's carefully patchworked childcare plans.

Before COVID-19 forced her 21-year-old son, Javoun Garrick, into virtual school, the 48-year-old single mother had a plan. She'd get up early and walk a few blocks from their Opa-locka apartment to catch a bus to her job in the environmental services department at Mount Sinai Hospital.

A neighbor who worked the night shift would stay with her kids until their rides came — a school bus to the North Dade Center for Modern Language for her 11-year-old daughter, and the Miami-Dade County Special Transportation Service that took Garrick to his special needs program at Miami Central High School.

Garrick is legally blind and cognitively impaired, so Hall makes sure he always has someone around him.

Then came COVID. Now Garrick is in virtual school

after an outbreak at his campus, and Hall has to wait for one of her friends and neighbors to show up and keep him company while he does his lessons. That makes her miss her bus, so she has to take a Lyft to make it to work on time — a \$25 trip one-way. Her secondary childcare option, weekend and holiday day camps and educational programs with the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind, have also been drastically scaled back (or canceled altogether) due to the pandemic.

That leaves Hall in an impossible position. She works six days a week, but Garrick needs care seven days a week. She's considering applying for a leave of absence from work to care for her son, but she worries about how she'd pay her bills without a steady paycheck.

"My toughest part is my

rent," she said. "If I don't work every day, I can't pay my rent. But the salary I have isn't enough to pay someone to care for him."

Garrick was nominated by his caseworker at Miami Lighthouse for the Blind, Betty Chavarria. She called him "the sweetest, caring and most respectful student I have worked with," and said he's loved by everyone on staff.

In the four years she's worked with him, Chavarria said she's seen Garrick come out of his shell. He excelled at a recent internship at First Tee of Miami, where he taught children to play adaptive golf.

"I loved working with Javoun witnessing his growth as an individual and a professional," she wrote in an email.

Hall and her son were both born in Jamaica. She moved to the U.S. when he

was 8, and he followed when he was 14 to seek better healthcare. Doctors discovered his eye problems when he was in middle school and declared him legally blind. He has Myopia Keratoconus, a genetic condition that warps and thins the cornea. He nearly went completely blind in his left eye this summer, a traumatic incident that he still has panic attacks about.

The past seven years have been an obstacle course in finding the right doctors, psychologists, nutritionists and educational programming. Garrick's father passed away years ago, Hall said.

Their apartment in Opa-locka is a hard-won slice of freedom for the family. Family pictures, including Garrick beaming at his high school graduation, dot the walls. A Christmas tree brushes the ceiling in the living room and monogrammed red felt stockings line the wall.

"It's tough, but I try to do the best for my kids every single day," Hall said. "If I'm not there,

who's going to be there for them?"

Garrick is in his final year of a program at Miami Central that focuses on life skills. When he graduates in the spring, his mother has "no idea" what's next.

Hall applied for citizenship for her son, who is a legal resident of the U.S., as well as guardianship. The paperwork for both is delayed due to the pandemic, she said, leaving her in limbo.

If he became a citizen, he would have access to Medicaid funds and care. For now, Hall pays most medical bills and co-pays out of pocket, although her coverage through her work health insurance should kick in soon.

"He worries about his eye, he worries about his nightmares, he worries about everything. And I do mean everything," she said.

From Wish Book this year, Hall would appreciate financial help covering her bills, as well as driving lessons so she can eventually get a car and drive her children to school and

herself to work.

Garrick loves playing video games on his Nintendo Switch console (his current favorite is The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild) and drawing with colored pencils. He asked for more games to play, like Mario Kart or Super Mario, and art supplies. He'd also like a TV for his bedroom, a new linen set for his full-sized bed and new clothes.

The family could also use a new set of towels, a blender for smoothies and a dinnerware set for four.

HOW TO HELP

Wish Book is trying to help hundreds of families in need this year. To donate, pay securely at MiamiHerald.com/wishbook. For information, call 305-376-2906 or email wishbook@miamiherald.com. (The most requested items are often laptops and tablets for school, furniture, and accessible vans.) Read more at MiamiHerald.com/wishbook.

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Once all eligible nominees' wishes have been fulfilled, Herald Charities Inc. may use funds for other charitable purposes.

DANIA BEACH

1 woman dead after city's 2nd homicide in week, sheriff's office says

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A woman was found shot dead outside the Sheridan Lake Apartments Saturday night, the Broward Sheriff's Office said, continuing

a Christmas Week of deadly shootings throughout South Florida.

Dania Beach's second homicide in four days happened around 10:30 p.m. Saturday, the same time as Wednesday's fatal shooting. BSO said a call about

gunshots in the area drew deputies to 321 E. Sheridan St., where the woman was found.

The woman's family had not been notified, so her name was not officially released. She was the 10th person in Miami-Dade,

Broward and Palm Beach counties found dead from gunshot wounds or with gunshot wounds that eventually killed them between Dec. 20 and Saturday night.

Anyone who knows anything about the shooting on

the Dania Beach/Hollywood border can contact BSO homicide Detective Tiberio Barbosa at 954-321-4210. For those looking to stay anonymous, but want to be eligible for a reward up to \$3,000 for information leading to an

arrest, they can contact Broward Crime Stoppers at 954-493-8477 (TIPS) or the Broward Crime Stoppers website.

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