

SPORTS

UH rolls into conference tournament semifinals.

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VACCINE TRACKER 2.0

Interactive map shows vaccination sites and doses available, plus latest data on shots administered.

HoustonChronicle.com/coronavirus

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Bill offers fix to mental health system

Legislation filed after Chronicle investigation revealed underfunding, insufficient oversight

By Alex Stuckey
STAFF WRITER

A Texas lawmaker filed legislation this week that would make it easier for the state to identify gaps in the care of mentally ill people who have been accused of a crime and who often wind up at state psychiatric hospitals.

Senate Bill 1346 would create the Office of Forensic Services, tasked with collecting data on services provided to individuals with mental illnesses who have been accused of a crime – forensic patients.

Sen. Sarah Eckhardt, a Democrat from Austin who could not be reached for comment, filed

the bill about a week after a Houston Chronicle investigation, “In Crisis,” revealed that the state’s mental health system has suffered for years from underfunding and insufficient oversight.

The investigation found that the state doesn’t have enough hospital beds to serve its growing population, with waitlists that stretch on for up to a year, and it’s failing to track whether patients are getting the help they

To read the Chronicle’s investigation, go to houstonchronicle.com/incrisis

need. Many find themselves in jail over and over again.

Roughly 70 percent of the 2,300 beds in the 10 state-run mental hospitals are occupied by people who have been deemed incompetent to stand trial by a court or found not guilty by reason of insanity.

Greg Hansch, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness-Texas, said the organization is strongly in favor of Eckhardt’s bill, which would help the Texas Health and Human Services Commission make data-driven decisions.

“If the office is created, we can start accounting for the people who have been served through forensic services and identifying what their needs are,” Hansch

Legislation continues on A15

Missing the mark



Marie D. De Jesús / Staff photographer

Veronica Ogunlade, 49, receives her first dose of Moderna’s COVID-19 vaccine at the CHRISTUS St. Mary’s Clinic.

By Jordan Rubio, Gwendolyn Wu and Marie D. De Jesús
STAFF WRITERS

Although Latino, Black and lower-income communities in Houston have been ravaged by COVID-19, the people living in these neighborhoods have been vaccinated at a much lower rate than their whiter, wealthier counterparts.

A Houston Chronicle analysis of

Vaccine rollout especially slow in hard-hit areas with majority Latino, Black populations

state COVID vaccine data found that 17 of the 20 ZIP codes in Harris County with the lowest percentage of people who have received at least one vaccine dose were majority Latino; 18 had median incomes below the county average.

Meanwhile, about 55 percent of all vaccine doses administered in the county have gone to residents of white, higher-income ZIP codes, de-

Vaccines continues on A15

Long way to go for economic recovery

More local jobs lost than first calculated

By Rebecca Carballo
STAFF WRITER

The coronavirus pandemic slammed the Houston economy much harder than first thought and the region’s full recovery from the deep recession is likely to take a year or more longer than forecast, economists said.

The region shed 62,000 more jobs in 2020 than initially estimated, according to revised data released Friday by the Labor Department. It could take as long as four years to recover all the jobs lost in the downturn – some 244,000 – compared with earlier forecasts of about three years.

“In no uncertain terms, these numbers are ugly,” said Patrick Jankowski, an economist at the Greater Houston Partnership, a business-finance economic development group. “To put it bluntly, we are in a deep hole right now. It’s going to take everyone that has a shovel to dig us out.”

Economists knew that Houston was hit harder by the pandemic than Texas and the nation as a whole because of the concentration of energy companies. In addition to the coronavirus and the recession, the local economy was pounded by another wrenching oil bust, which af-

Jobs continues on A13

Harris County’s voting expansions targeted by Texas GOP lawmakers

By Taylor Goldenstein
AUSTIN BUREAU

AUSTIN – Harris County made a big push to expand mail-in and early voting during the 2020 election, offering options never before seen in Texas such as 24-hour polling places and drive-thru voting.

Republicans in the Legislature are now moving to make sure it never happens again, targeting the county with sweeping voting

restrictions they hope to enact ahead of the 2022 midterm elections that they say are necessary to prevent voter fraud.

A priority Senate bill filed this week would prohibit local election officials from sending out mail ballot applications to voters who have not requested them, another step Harris County pioneered during the 2020 election. The bill would also ban certain early voting opportunities, including drive-thru voting and ear-

ly voting before 7 a.m. and after 7 p.m.

The goal of Senate Bill 7 is “to make sure that the election process is fair and, equally important, to make sure that Texans know it’s fair,” said Sen. Bryan Hughes, R-Mineola, the author of the bill. “As people lose faith in the process, as people don’t think their vote is going to be counted accurately or doubt whether the process is secure, they’re going to be discour-

Votes continues on A13



Steve Gonzales / Staff file photo

A voter assistant helps a drive-thru voter at the Houston Food Bank. Over 100,000 voters used the drive-thru method last year.

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TOMATOES
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FROM THE COVER

VACCINES

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spite these areas making up only 40 percent of the county's population. The dichotomy leaves neighborhoods such as Greater Greenspoint, where 10 percent of the population has been sickened by the virus, with low rates of vaccination, whereas communities such as Bellaire, where far fewer have fallen ill, boast significantly higher immunization rates.

A mix of factors – outreach, access to vaccination sites and supply – is preventing a more equitable distribution of the vaccine.

"I am not surprised," said Richard Torres, president of the CHRISTUS Foundation for Healthcare, which operates clinics catering to Hispanic and low-income communities in Houston.

Areas that have been hit the hardest from the virus have some of the lowest vaccination rates in the county. Of the 10 ZIP codes with the highest number of cases per capita, only one has fully vaccinated more than 5 percent of its residents. And all but one ranked in the bottom half of ZIP codes when examining the percentage of the population that has received at least one dose.

While availability affects all neighborhoods, Torres said the restricted flow of vaccines coming to Texas is particularly bad for low-income communities.

Many of the people living in those neighborhoods are essential workers, who may not be able to step out in the middle of the day for a vaccine appointment or spend hours waiting at a drive-thru site.

"If you're talking about making a dent in this problem, you need to look at where you have the biggest bang for your buck," Torres said. "I would argue we need to prioritize these minority communities because that is where the need is greatest and where you can make the greatest impact you can on the overall infection rate."

'Longstanding inequities'

While the number of vaccine doses administered per ZIP code hasn't been spread across the county evenly, neither has the brunt of the pandemic.

Latino- and Black-majority ZIP codes have accounted for nearly 62 percent of all confirmed COVID cases in Harris County, according to city and county data. And the lion's share of the county's hardest-hit ZIP codes is either majority Latino or Black.

Nationally, white people are more than three times as likely to obtain a first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine compared with Latino people, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, a Washington-based think tank. These patterns are not new, said Samantha Artiga, the foundation's director of racial equity and health policy.

"What we're seeing is the outcome of longstanding inequities across social and economic factors that have created increased barriers to care for people of color," Artiga said.

In 77032, a majority Latino and Black ZIP code near George Bush Intercontinental Airport, there have been nearly 1,500 confirmed cases for a population of 14,334 – one of the highest per capita rates in the county. However, less than 8 percent of its population has received at least one vaccine dose.

On the other hand, 77401 in Bellaire has had one of the lowest COVID case per capita rates in the county, with 788 confirmed cases since the pandemic began, according to local health data. However, nearly 65 percent of its residents have received at least one dose of a COVID vaccine.

During the initial rollout, Texas prioritized "hubs" that could get thousands of doses into people's arms as quickly as possible. But the strategy didn't address access or inequity issues, said



Photos by Marie D. De Jesús / Staff photographer

Benito Moreno, 77, gets a bandage after being vaccinated with his second dose of Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine at the CHRISTUS St. Mary's Clinic. Outreach, access to vaccination sites and supply are preventing a more equitable distribution of the vaccine.

Stephen Williams, director of the Houston Health Department.

The vaccine site at NRG Park is supposed to help target residents in the hardest-hit neighborhoods. Williams said the city has "been very mindful and purposeful" in prioritizing the most vulnerable ZIP codes.

"We have to go specifically into the community in terms of outreach and vaccine efforts," he said.

So far, those hubs are not in those communities. Instead, most are located in the ZIP codes with the highest percentages of first doses administered in the county – the Texas Medical Center (ZIP code 77030) or Memorial Villages (77024).

Health policy experts say transportation poses another problem: At megasites such as NRG Park, people must arrive by car, leaving those who travel on foot or by public transit – a population that skews toward low-income, Black and Latino people – out of the equation.

"A lot of our patients are public transit dependent," said Torres, the CHRISTUS Health president. "That seems to have been a barrier for them to access the NRG site."

Where vaccines need to go

The numbers indicate that the vaccines aren't reaching where they need to be, said Anne Dunkelberg, a health policy expert



The Houston area's hardest-hit neighborhoods, many of which are majority Black or Latino, are among the least vaccinated.

at Every Texan, an Austin-based think tank.

Dunkelberg said the state needs a clearer plan to get vaccines into low-income, Latino and Black communities: "Megasites work, but we need multi-pronged approaches."

In 77060, which includes Greater Greenspoint, a little more than 800 people are fully vaccinated out of a population of more than 46,000. About 2,600 vaccine doses have been administered to residents in this ZIP code, which is more than three-quarters Latino with a median household income of \$32,000.

Compare that with 77401, in Bellaire, where white residents

make up about 70 percent of the population and the median household income is nearly \$200,000. There, about a quarter of all residents are fully vaccinated and more than 11,400 vaccine doses have been administered – four times the number of doses administered in Greenspoint, which is significantly more populous.

Vaccine providers say they want to reach out to more communities but have been hampered by the doses available.

Cynthia Arreola managed to snag a dose when she took her aunt to be vaccinated at CHRISTUS St. Mary's Clinic in the East End about a month ago. When workers asked her if she wanted

to receive an extra dose of vaccine that was about to expire, she said yes. But no one else in her family has been able to get vaccinated.

"I asked if there would be any more doses for my husband, and they didn't have any," she said.

CHRISTUS' clinics are struggling to get 250 doses weekly, making it difficult to determine how many patients they should schedule for vaccine appointments each day.

The Houston Health Department receives thousands of doses as a hub provider but operates more sites and inoculates more patients.

"You need to maintain the sites that are giving out 1,000 doses a day or more," Williams said. "There needs to be a parallel effort to push vaccines into these communities where there are COVID-vulnerable populations."

However, race and income levels are not the only factor when it comes to a ZIP code's vaccination rate. Age seems to play a significant factor as well.

Across the county, ZIP codes with a higher share of residents age 65 and older tend to have more people who have been vaccinated. Those ZIP codes with a lower vaccination rate, including Greater Greenspoint, have a smaller share of people 65 and older than the county average.

In context

Latinos make up 20 percent of all Texans who have received at least one dose of a COVID vaccine, despite making up nearly 40 percent of the state's population, according to state data.

Latinos also make up more than 46 percent of all deaths from the virus, according to state data, a disproportionately high amount.

Experts say medical providers need to increase outreach in multiple languages and expand vaccine sites to the communities that are physically accessible to vulnerable groups.

That includes creating vaccine sign-ups that are intuitive and meet people at their level of technological access and literacy.

"When you talk about the gap between those that are wealthy and nonwealthy, and white and nonwhite, I don't think it's intentional," Torres said. "I think it's just a reflection of the effort that we've made so far, and we have to fine-tune it."

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Benito Moreno, 77, holds his vaccination record after receiving his second dose. CHRISTUS clinics, which cater to Hispanic and low-income communities, are struggling to get 250 doses weekly.

LEGISLATION

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said. "It will help identify what the gaps in the continuum of care are and where people are slipping through the cracks."

For example, the Chronicle's investigation found that the commission does not track how many people who are transferred from maximum security

to a less-restrictive setting are later accused of injuring other patients or staff.

Christine Mann, a spokeswoman for the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, declined to comment on Eckhardt's bill.

"As a state agency, we are prohibited from lobbying for or against any particular bill," Mann said in an email. "We will implement all legislation that is enact-

"(The office would) help identify ... where people are slipping through the cracks."

Greg Hansch, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness-Texas

ed into law. Given this bill was recently filed, we are still analyzing its potential impact to our agency."

Under Eckhardt's bill, the new Office of Forensic Services would create a comprehensive statewide registry of hospital beds available for mentally ill individuals accused of a crime.

It would collect data on patient outcomes for programs that include outpatient and jail-based competency restoration, and it would track the length of time it takes someone to receive forensic services. The office also

would develop best practices for inpatient psychiatric services for these individuals.

The bill would also allow the office to consult on and review contracts for outpatient and jail-based competency restoration programs, as well as look at local initiatives such as jail diversion and crisis services.

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