

# The Birmingham News

**Tornado cleanup continues in Fultondale. A3**

THE COVID-19 VACCINE

## Vaccine skepticism lurks in Tuskegee



Nurse Marianne Williams administers a COVID-19 vaccine to a woman as a coworker looks on at the county health department in Tuskegee on Jan. 25. The clinic has yet to reach its maximum capacity for immunizing people in the mostly Black city, the site of the infamous “Tuskegee syphilis study,” that ended in 1972. *Jay Reeves, Associated Press*

### Many in city have relatives who were subjected to unethical government experimentation during the ‘Tuskegee syphilis study’

Jay Reeves *Associated Press*

Lucenia Dunn spent the early days of the coronavirus pandemic encouraging people to wear masks and keep a safe distance from each other in Tuskegee, a mostly Black city where the government once used unsuspecting African American men as guinea pigs in a study of a sexually transmitted disease.

Now, the onetime mayor of the town immortalized as the home of the infamous “Tuskegee syphilis study” is wary of getting inoculated against COVID-19. Among other things, she’s suspicious of the government promoting a vaccine that was developed in record time when it can’t seem to conduct adequate virus testing or consistently provide quality rural health care.

“I’m not doing this vaccine right now. That doesn’t mean I’m never going to do it. But I know enough to withhold getting it until we see all that is involved,” said Dunn, who is Black.

The coronavirus immunization campaign is off to a shaky start in Tuskegee and other parts of Macon County. Area leaders point to a resistance among residents spurred by a distrust of government promises and decades of failed health programs. Many people in this city of 8,500 have relatives who were subjected to unethical government experimentation during the syphilis study.

“It does have an impact on decisions. Being in this community, growing up in this community, I would be very untruthful if I didn’t say that,” said Frank Lee, emergency management director in Macon County. Lee is Black.

Health experts have stressed both the vaccines’ safety and efficacy. They have noted that while the vaccines were developed with record-breaking speed, they were based on decades of prior research. Vaccines used in the U.S. have shown no signs of serious side effects in studies of tens of thousands of people. And with more than 26 million vaccinations administered in the U.S. alone so far, no red flags have been reported.

Tuskegee is not a complete outlier. A recent survey conducted by the communications firm Edelman revealed that as of November, only 59% of people in the U.S. were willing to get vaccinated within a year with just 33% happy to do so as soon as possible.

But skepticism seems to run deeper here.

When Alabama and the rest of the South were still segregated by race, government medical workers starting in 1932 withheld treatment for unsuspecting men infected with syphilis in Tuskegee and surrounding Macon County so physicians could track the disease.

SEE TUSKEGEE, A5

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*Frank Lee, emergency management director in Macon County*

WASHINGTON

## GOP legislators push back against gun crackdown

But House speaker’s rules win backing of Democratic Rep. Terri Sewell

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The fallout from the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol is creating a new arena in the battle over gun rights. Democrats, led by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California, claim that they’re concerned about a potential “enemy from within” the Congress itself.

This alarms Republican lawmakers who say that gun-possession at the Capitol by members of Congress has never posed problems for anyone. They accuse the Democrats of concocting a controversy where none existed.

“Members have every right — as does every American — to protect themselves and carry a weapon where permitted,” said U.S. Rep. Robert Aderholt, R-Haleyville.

A 1967 regulation exempts members of Congress from a federal law banning firearms on the Capitol grounds. Guns, however, are prohibited from the House floor.

Alabama’s lawmakers, in responses to AL.com, mostly support having the ability to possess a gun, if they wish, to protect themselves in or around the Capitol. SEE GUN CRACKDOWN, A4

CORRECTIONS

## Ivey signs 30-year leases for new prisons

Mike Cason *mcason@al.com*

Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey signed 30-year lease agreements Monday on two new men’s prisons to be built and owned by private developers in Escambia and Elmore counties.

The agreements come after more than two years of planning by the Ivey administration and the Alabama Department of Corrections to build three men’s new prisons. Negotiations continue on the third prison, which will be in Bibb County.

Ivey said the lease agreements are the best way for Alabama to replace its aging prisons. She noted Alabama faces potential consequences from federal courts if it does not improve its prisons. In December, the U.S. Department of Justice sued the state, alleging unconstitutional conditions in men’s prisons.

SEE PRISONS, A5

VESTAVIA HILLS

## Six women sexually abused at massage parlor

Carol Robinson *crobinson@al.com*

A young Jefferson County woman looking forward to getting her first therapeutic massage ended up a sexual assault victim and has been living a nightmare for weeks.

The 26-year-old woman earlier this month saw that a Vestavia Hills massage parlor was offering a special for health care workers and first responders as a sign of appreciation for their efforts amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Carrying a tremendous amount of stress in her neck, she said, she jumped at the offer and booked an appointment.

When it was over, however, the woman said she had been fondled and worse at the Oasis Day Spa and Wellness Center in a second-floor suite in the Rocky Ridge Plaza off Rocky Ridge Road. “I just don’t feel like myself anymore,” she said. “I feel like a part of me has been taken away.”

Another woman, 39, received a massage at Oasis as a gift from a family member. She booked a one-hour hot stone massage and said she, too, ended up violated.

“I can’t believe somebody had the audacity to do what he did,” she said.

LeVan Uriah Johnson, the 43-year-old CEO of Oasis, has been charged with six counts of first-degree sexual abuse against six women who were clients at the busi-

ness, which opened in October. Though Oasis has a business license, the owner and employees are not licensed massage therapists.

Vestavia Hills police obtained the felony warrants in four cases 10 days ago and added two more Monday. Lt. Mike Keller said the investigation is ongoing and more charges are possible.

SEE ABUSE, A4

