

DEADLINE LOOMS

Staff shortages are predicted if unvaxed are fired

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A state mandate for home health care workers to be vaccinated against COVID-19 or be fired hits a deadline on Thursday, and some agencies are predicting large shortages of workers while others say they support the measure as a way to keep both employees and patients safe.

At the same time, the number of new daily cases of COVID-19 on Long Island jumped to 850 — from 562 the previous day — in test results from Tuesday.

The vaccine mandate covers adult care facilities, home health agencies, long-term home health care programs, AIDS home care programs, hospice care, and diagnostic and treatment centers.

Former Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo announced the mandate in August, and Gov. Kathy Hochul is implementing it. Despite industry pleas this week to extend the deadline, she has shown no sign she will.

At least one home health care agency on Long Island said it supports the move, and ordered its own vaccination requirement for workers even earlier — in July.

“Patients don’t want us to come if we’re not vaccinated,” Linda Taylor, CEO of Visiting Nurse Service & Hospice of Suffolk, said Wednesday. “While we don’t want to lose a single worker, we believe in this mandate and the importance of getting vaccinated.”

Of the Northport-based agency’s 200 employees, she said, six are refusing to get vaccinated and will be terminated on Friday.

More delay, more risk

Asked if the state should delay the deadline as some groups are asking, she said no.

“The more we delay, the more we are at risk. It’s just



Minority Leader Mitch McConnell at the Capitol Wednesday.

AP / J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE

McConnell offers stopgap debt fix

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Republican and Democratic leaders edged back Wednesday from a perilous standoff over lifting the nation’s borrowing cap, with Democratic senators signaling they were receptive to an offer from Senate GOP leader Mitch McConnell that would allow an emergency extension into December.

McConnell made the offer shortly before Republicans were prepared to block legislation to suspend the debt limit until December of next year and as President Joe Biden and business leaders ramped up their concerns that an unprecedented federal default would disrupt government payments to millions of people and throw the nation into recession.

The emerging agreement sets the stage for a sequel of sorts in December, when Congress will again face pressing deadlines to fund the government and raise the debt limit before heading home for the holidays.

A procedural vote — on the longer extension the Republicans were going to block — was abruptly delayed late Monday and the Senate recessed so lawmakers could discuss next steps.

Democrats emerged from their meeting more optimistic that a crisis would be averted. “Basically, I’m glad that Mitch McConnell finally saw the light,” said Sen. Bernie Sanders, the independent senator from Vermont. The Re-

publicans “have finally done the right thing and at least we now have another couple months in order to get a permanent solution.”

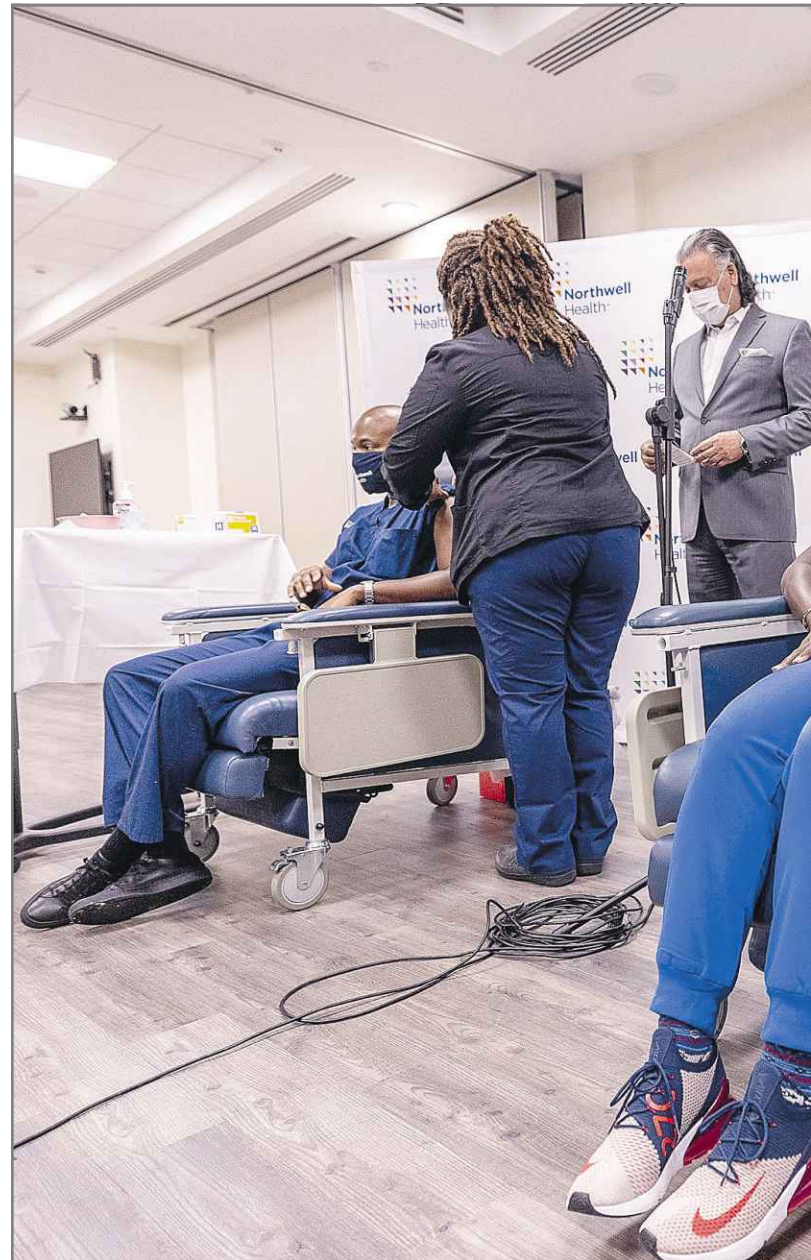
Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) added that, assuming final details in the emergency legislation are in order, “for the next three months, we’ll continue to make it clear that we are ready to continue to vote to pay our bills and Republicans aren’t.”

Unsurprisingly, McConnell portrayed it very differently. “This will moot Democrats’ excuses about the time crunch they created and give the unified Democratic government more than enough time to pass standalone debt limit legislation through reconciliation,” he said.

Congress has just days to act before the Oct. 18 deadline when the Treasury Department has warned it would quickly run short of funds to handle the nation’s already accrued debt load.

McConnell and Senate Republicans have insisted that Democrats would have to go it alone to raise the debt ceiling and allow the Treasury to renew its borrowing so that the country could meet its financial obligations.

Further, McConnell has insisted that Democrats use the same cumbersome legislative process called reconciliation that they used to pass a \$1.9 trillion COVID relief bill and have been employing to try and pass Biden’s \$3.5 trillion measure to boost safety net, health and environmental programs.



Sandra Lindsay, a nurse and the first American to get the vaccine in

kicking the can down the road,” Taylor said. “I don’t see any point in delaying it. If anything, it’s going to make it worse.”

Staff at federally qualified health centers, community-based providers that focus services for medically underserved communities, are also covered by the Thursday mandate.

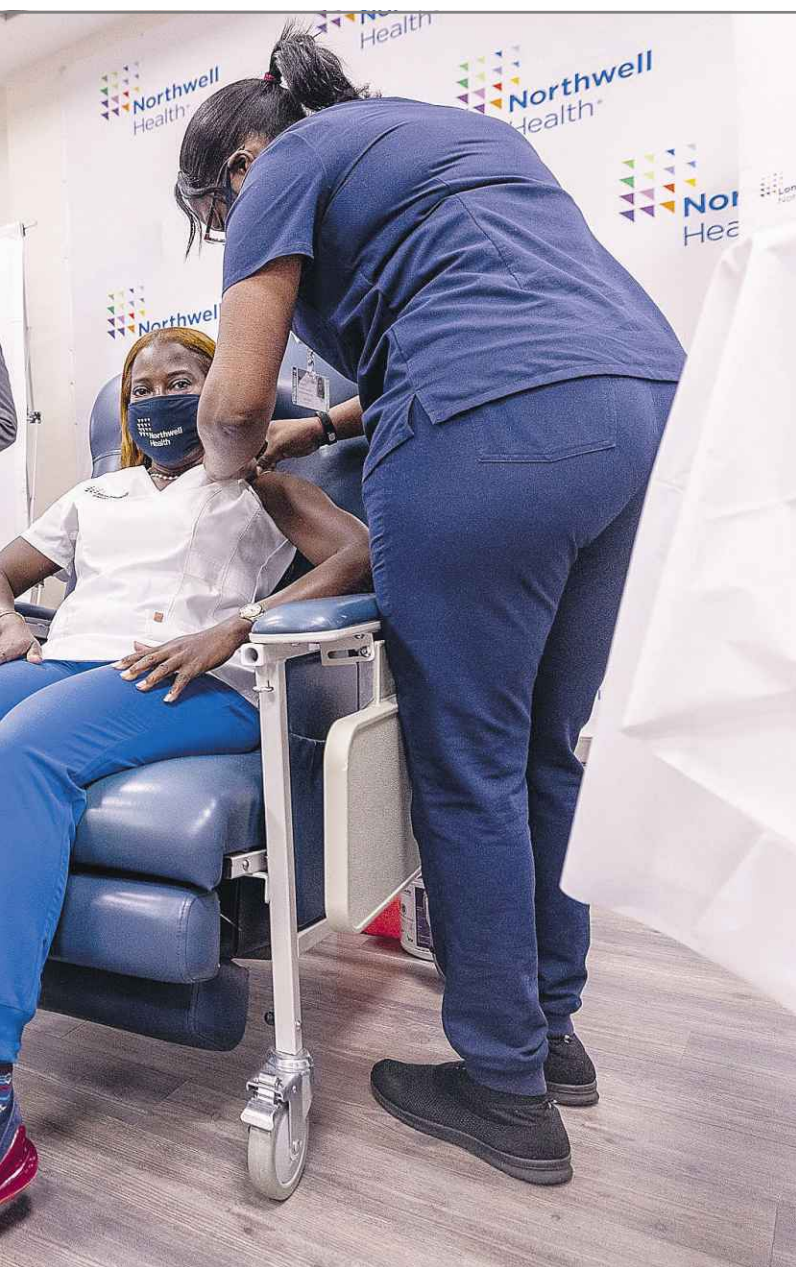
David Nemiroff, president and CEO of Long Island FQHC, which has seven facilities in Nassau County as well as three school-based centers, said most of their 360 employees had re-

ceived at least one dose of the vaccine.

About nine people had not been vaccinated as of Wednesday afternoon, Nemiroff said, but he expects they will get their shots at the last minute. All of the clinicians in the centers have been vaccinated.

“These are people who work in our health centers — medical assistants, clerks, I don’t know all the titles yet,” he said. “Hopefully this won’t impact operations, but we will have to see. I think because it’s a low number, we will be OK.”

FOR HOME HEALTH WORKERS



December, gets a booster shot Wednesday in New Hyde Park.

In addition, seven people have applied for religious exemptions.

“We will see what plays out with the courts,” he said.

Some groups that represent home health agencies, however, are still asking for a delay, though that appeared unlikely Wednesday as the deadline loomed.

“People are trying everything they can to be compliant, but we’re still seeing a risk of a very significant gap” in workers, said Al Cardillo, president and CEO of the Albany-based

Home Care Association of New York State.

He is asking Hochul to permit a “phased-in” approach to the mandate instead of a hard Thursday deadline.

No plans to extend deadline

State officials said Wednesday there were no plans to extend the deadline.

“It is critical for health care workers to get vaccinated to protect themselves and the vulnerable populations they care for, and we will continue to work with providers and

First vaccine for malaria wins approval A37

stakeholders to protect quality patient care,” the state Department of Health said in a statement.

The department said it expects more home health care workers to get vaccinated as the deadline hits, just as last week’s mandate for hospital and nursing home workers caused a spike in inoculations.

Taylor said her agency saw an increase in employees getting vaccinated as the deadline neared. She said staffing was always a fluid situation at home health care agencies, but she did not expect a major disruption due to the mandate.

One Visiting Nurse employee explained why she got the shot: “All of my colleagues are vaccinated and my patients are vaccinated,” said Heather Matias, a home health aide. “I knew I was working with mostly elderly patients, and I would not be able to live with myself if I got them sick. I also wanted to protect my family.”

The employees who declined to get vaccinated included two nurses, two home health aides, one physical therapist and one social worker, Taylor said.

In test results from Tuesday, Nassau registered 336 new cases of COVID-19 and Suffolk had 514. New York City logged 1,401 new cases.

The seven-day average for positivity in testing for the virus continued to drop on Long Island, hitting 2.74% Tuesday, compared to 2.82% the previous day.

Across the state, 32 people died on Tuesday of causes linked to the virus, including four in Suffolk and one in Nassau.

“My number one priority is getting everyone vaccinated, especially those in health care settings,” Hochul said in a statement. “If we can get shots to everyone who needs them, we can keep our businesses open and safe.”

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U.S. plans \$1B buy of home virus tests

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The White House announced Wednesday that it will buy \$1 billion worth of rapid, at-home coronavirus tests to address ongoing shortages, a plan hailed by public health experts who called the move long overdue.

The actions will quadruple the number of tests available to Americans by December, according to Jeff Zients, the White House coronavirus response coordinator. The news follows Monday’s decision by the Food and Drug Administration to allow the sale of an antigen test from U.S.-based Acon Laboratories.

The White House expects that decision and the purchase of the additional tests will increase the number of at-home tests to 200 million per month by December.

“This is a big deal” said Scott Becker, chief executive of the Association of Public Health Laboratories, who said the spotty availability of rapid tests had hampered efforts to track and combat the surge of coronavirus cases driven by the highly transmissible delta variant. “The White House is beginning to take testing as seriously as they’ve taken vaccinations.”

The administration is also aiming to increase free testing by doubling President Joe Biden’s earlier commitment to expand the number of pharmacies in the federal government’s free testing program to 20,000, Zients said at a news briefing Wednesday. Biden last month announced a coronavirus response plan that envisioned a significant expansion of testing capacity.

The United States has lagged several European and Asian countries in testing for much of the pandemic, with many Americans reporting in recent months that they have struggled to get testing appointments or to be able to purchase at-home tests.

While the FDA has authorized several at-home tests, public health experts criticized the agency for not moving faster to greenlight more of them to expedite the tests’ availability.

“These tests are cheap to make — and there’s a lot of demand for it out there,” said Ashish Jha, dean of the Brown University School of Public Health. “The reason the market hasn’t worked is because the FDA has made it very difficult for these tests to get out into the marketplace.”

Jeff Shuren, director of the FDA’s Center for Devices and Radiological Health, disputed that characterization. He said the main difference between the U.S. and countries with cheaper, more available tests is that those governments heavily invested in the tests. Having large purchasing agreements, including the one announced Wednesday by the White House, drives production up and prices down.

In the White House briefing, Zients said the testing companies Quidel and OraSure are also rapidly expanding the production of their at-home tests to get more on the market. When pressed on why the White House did not increase the availability of such tests sooner, Zients said the tests only became available earlier this year.

By the end of the year, he said, the U.S. should have about half a billion tests available per month between at-home tests and PCR tests that people can take at a local pharmacy, clinic or doctors office. “Together, the steps we’re taking will ensure that every American, no matter their income level or ZIP Code, can access accurate, convenient and affordable testing,” he said.

Some experts said it will be important for the government to educate people about when the tests should be used, how to use them and what to do with the results.

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