

Towns County Herald

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Tamela Cooper takes reins as Towns County Coroner

News Special
Towns County Herald

The start of the year saw changes in the Towns County Coroner's Office, as Tamela Cooper is sworn in, Dec. 30, 2020, by Probate Judge David Rogers after winning election to the office in November.

Tamela assumed her role as coroner on Jan. 1, 2021, though she is in no way new to the Coroner's Office, having served the past seven years as a deputy coroner. Through the years, she has developed relationships with coroners and law enforcement personnel around the state.

A 2012 graduate of Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service in Decatur, Mrs. Cooper is local, a small business owner, a wife and a mother. At first glance, most people see Tamela as

a compassionate, caring and empathetic person.

When asked deep questions about her career choice and desire to be Towns County's coroner, the reply she gave highlighted her aspiration to serve the people of her community on a personal level.

"I am the daughter of a hard-working, talented and honest man," Tamela said, "and my mother had that gift of gab, cared deeply for people in general and wanted to leave people better than when she found them."

"They set the tone for my life; my word or handshake is better than any signed contract, and I seek to see the good in people. I want to give the grieving people of Towns County a coroner with that balance."

Though she may not like to admit it, Tamela is a driven, talented, and highly trained professional who has big plans for the Coroner's Office.

"I have a list of tasks I want to accomplish," she said. "I want to educate people on things they may never think about otherwise, such as the danger of black ice in winter months and talking to our children and young adults about drugs, vaping and risky behavior."

"While my main role is to attend to unattended deaths and be the voice for the decedent, I truly want to be a source to help decrease preventable deaths. My goal is to push the number of coroner cases we work down as much as possible."

"It is certainly a privilege See Coroner, Page 6A



L-R: Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw, Probate Judge David Rogers, Deputy Coroner Ken Nicholson, Coroner Tamela Cooper and Deputy Coroner Sarah Brown on elected official swear-in day Dec. 30, 2020. Photo/Submitted

John Wilkinson to become NGTC president on Feb. 1

News Special
Towns County Herald

ATLANTA – Technical College System of Georgia Commissioner Greg Dozier has appointed former Georgia State Senator and Career, Technical and Agricultural Education specialist John Wilkinson as the new President of North Georgia Technical College.

The State Board of the Technical College System of Georgia approved the appointment on Thursday, Jan. 14, in Atlanta, and Wilkinson will assume his new role as president on Feb. 1.

"Sen. Wilkinson has spent his professional life advancing and advocating for CTAE here in Georgia," Dozier said Thursday. "He is one of Georgia's leading

CTAE experts, and we are excited for him to lead North Georgia Technical College as we serve the needs of business and industry in the region and across the state.

"I know he will continue the lasting legacy left by Dr. Mark Ivester by providing opportunity for every student that comes through the college's doors."

Wilkinson began serving in Georgia's General Assembly in 2011 as State Senator representing District 50. Sen. Wilkinson served as the Chairman of the Agriculture and Consumer Affairs Committee and as Vice-Chairman of the Education and Youth Committee.

In 2012, he was named



John Wilkinson "Policy Maker of the Year" by the Georgia Association for Career and Technical Education. See Wilkinson, Page 6A

Health officials urge patience as vaccine rollout continues

Hospital staff work around clock against COVID

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Local COVID-19 vaccine providers are asking that people remain patient in the days ahead as officials work together to get as many people vaccinated as possible.

As severe illness from COVID-19 continues seemingly unabated everywhere and threatens to overwhelm health care systems across the nation, many Americans have grown frustrated with the vaccine rollout, including right here in North Georgia.

Personal precautions like mask-wearing, social distancing and limiting gatherings are still being recommended by public health professionals, even after vaccination, but the vaccine remains the No. 1 hope for millions of people most at risk



Towns County Health Department Nurse Manager Bethany Barrett, left, attended a meeting in the Union County Commissioner's office Friday, to discuss offering a local mass vaccine clinic for both counties, taking place Jan. 22. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

of death and hospitalization with COVID-19. Vaccines are being allocated via phased distribution as stock becomes available, though it remains a reality that demand is much higher than current supplies, resulting in

See Vaccine Rollout, Page 3A

Residents, visitors yearn for life after COVID-19

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

As the COVID-19 vaccine works its way slowly but surely into more arms each week, people in the community have been considering getting the shot themselves as it becomes available to help slow the spread of the virus.

Brittney Finley of White County received her vaccine Jan. 6, and speaking from experience, she said she wanted people to know that it is a safe process.

"I don't think the vaccine is bad," Finley said at the Hiawassee Ingles Jan. 16. "I don't understand why people are so afraid of it. All these people have been telling me that it is government control or whatever, but those people are crazy and have completely lost it."

"I got the vaccine and I feel just fine. It hurt just like all the other needles, but it was over in a few seconds. It was no different than any other one I have gotten in my life – short and to the point. And if it helps,



The diversity of opinions among residents and visitors to the area is always refreshing. Pictured here: people going about their business at Ingles in Hiawassee Sunday. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

then that is just good news."

Samuel Olson of Towns County has had COVID-19 already, and he believes people simply need a shift in perspective to allow the world to return to normalcy and lift people out of perpetual fear of

the virus.

"Everything is about COVID these days," Olson said while dining at Kountry Kitchen on Saturday. "It just doesn't seem that bad to me, and I think people are overreacting See Life after COVID-19, Page 6A

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Heaton appeals case, requests conviction reversal or new trial

By Linda Erbele
Towns County Herald

Lawyers for former Blairsville physician James Heaton have met a Jan. 12 filing deadline with the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit, asking that his federal convictions be reversed or that he be granted a new trial.

In October 2019, a federal jury found Heaton and codefendant Mike Gowder guilty on multiple counts involving prescriptions for controlled substances written "outside the usual course of professional practice or not for a legitimate medical purpose."

As a result, Heaton was sentenced to 72 months in prison and is currently out on bond, due to begin serving his sentence no sooner than May 1, 2021, to give him an opportunity to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

Gowder was sentenced to 12 months and a day. He, too, remains free on bond and



James Heaton must report to prison no earlier than May 1, 2021. Gowder has yet to appeal his conviction, and his recent request to have his sentence changed to home confinement was denied by the court in December.

While Heaton's legal team has requested "oral argument" to explain its case in depth, the Jan. 12 appellate brief asks that the court consider three main "issues" in relation to applicable federal law, namely Title 21, Section 841, of the

United States Code:

1) Was instruction from the judge to the jury a "misstatement of law" that would have prejudiced the jury against Heaton?

2) Is the very language of the law "unconstitutionally vague?"

3) Was the evidence presented by the government "sufficient to sustain a conviction" under the law?

"This is a case about the general medical practice of a small-town doctor," Heaton's attorneys write in the filing. "For some patients without insurance, Dr. Heaton would allow them to delay payment. He met with patients at his office, after hours, at their homes, and at the hospital."

"He delivered babies, cared for patients at the local nursing home and treated a wide variety of ailments in between. He was the quintessential country doctor." See Heaton, Page 6A

January Term 2021 Grand Jury Indictments

The following individuals were indicted during the January Term 2021 of the Towns County Grand Jury, which met last week for the first time since January Term 2020 following a COVID-19 hiatus:

Ernest Dwight Tiger, three counts aggravated assault; three counts disorderly conduct.

Cody Lee Elkins, false imprisonment; battery, Family Violence.

Barbara Danielle Prince, possession of methamphetamine; tampering with evidence; obstruction of an officer; possession of marijuana, less than an ounce; failure to wear seat safety belt.

Joseph Lee English, two counts fleeing or attempting to

elude a police officer; driving under the influence (per se); driving under the influence (less safe) (alcohol); hit and run; reckless driving; failure to maintain lane.

Angela Denise Hamilton, aggravated assault; burglary in the first degree.

Michael Anthony George, burglary in the second degree; criminal damage to property in the second degree.

Daniel Lee Keys, aggravated assault.

Connor McCoy King, statutory rape.

Steven Craig Appling, five counts terroristic threats; disorderly conduct; theft by taking.

Cassie Anne Cooper,

aggravated assault.

Jillian Murphy Burrell, crossing the guard lines with drugs; possession of methamphetamine; possession of a controlled substance; possession of drug-related objects; driving under the influence; fleeing or attempting to elude a police officer; failure to maintain lane; giving false information to a law enforcement officer; driving while license suspended; use of license plate to conceal identity; open container.

Marquis Gwan Ford, possession of methamphetamine; possession of a controlled substance; possession of drug-related objects.

Joaquin Eugene Mosley, possession of

methamphetamine; possession of a controlled substance; possession of drug-related objects; possession of marijuana, less than an ounce.

Jordan Wayne Campbell, two counts fleeing or attempting to elude a police officer; obstruction of an officer; reckless driving; driving on wrong side of roadway; speeding.

William Roy Chastain Jr., three counts obstruction of an officer; three counts terroristic threats; two counts simple battery; driving under the influence.

Randy Clay Segers, cruelty to the children in the first degree; battery, Family Violence; obstruction of an officer.

Kevin Buryl Caldwell, interference with government

property; two counts theft of services; possession of methamphetamine; possession of drug-related objects.

Patrick Rhett Nicholson, three counts aggravated assault.

Martin Junior Lovig, fleeing or attempting to elude a police officer; speeding; driving on wrong side of roadway; improper use of central lane; reckless driving.

Zachary Hunter Drewry, exploitation and intimidation of disabled adult, elder person or resident; battery, Family Violence; simple battery, Family Violence; criminal trespass.

Jay Bradley Sanders, three counts aggravated assault; false imprisonment; kidnapping;

criminal attempt to commit a felony; battery; hindering emergency telephone call.

Weston Shanae Acosta, extortion; forgery in the first degree; driving under the influence (per se); driving under the influence (less safe) (alcohol); giving false information to a law enforcement officer; expired tag.

Stephanie Lynn Brown, theft by taking; criminal damage to property in the second degree; driving under the influence; driving under the influence (less safe) (alcohol); obstruction of an officer; failure to maintain lane.

Amy Jean Dockery, crossing the guard lines with drugs; two counts possession of See Indictments, Page 6A

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