

Founders of Boston Nonprofit Indicted on Fraud Charges

The founders of a local nonprofit, Violence in Boston (VIB), have been indicted by a federal grand jury in connection with a series of alleged schemes designed to defraud VIB and its donors, the Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance and a mortgage lending business based in Chicago.

Monica Cannon-Grant, 41, and her husband Clark Grant, 38, both of Taunton, were charged in an 18-count indictment with two counts of wire fraud conspiracy; one count of conspiracy; 13 counts of wire fraud; and one count of making false statements to a mortgage lending business. The indictment also charges Cannon-Grant with one count of mail fraud.

Cannon-Grant was arrested this morning and will make her initial appearance in federal court in Boston later today. Grant was previously charged by criminal complaint in October 2021 with one count of wire fraud and one count of false statements on a loan and credit application. An arraignment date for Grant has not yet been scheduled by the Court.

Cannon-Grant is the founder and CEO of VIB, an anti-violence nonprofit formally established in 2017, the stated purpose of which is to reduce violence, raise social awareness and aid community causes in Boston, among other purposes. Grant is Cannon-Grant's husband, a founding director of VIB, and until recently a full-time employee for a commuter services company since July 2018.

The indictment alleges that the defendants conspired to use VIB as a vehicle to solicit and receive charitable contributions from institutional and individual donors that they then used for a wide range of personal expenses and to enrich themselves while concealing such expenditures from VIB

directors, officers and others. Specifically, from 2017 through at least 2020, it is alleged that Cannon-Grant and Grant exercised exclusive control over VIB financial accounts and diverted VIB money to themselves through cash withdrawals, cashed checks, debit purchases and transfers to their personal bank accounts.

On numerous occasions between 2017 through 2021, Cannon-Grant allegedly applied for public and private funded grants and donations in which she represented the funds were to be used for VIB charitable purposes. However, it is alleged that Cannon-Grant and Grant used grant and donation money to pay for personal expenses including, among other things, hotel reservations; groceries; gas; car rentals; auto repairs; Uber rides; restaurants; food deliveries; nail salons; and personal travel. The defendants did not disclose to other VIB directors or VIB's bookkeepers or financial auditors that they had used VIB funds for such payments.

The defendants also allegedly conspired to defraud the Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance (DUA) by collecting Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) benefits while at the same time collecting income from a variety of sources, including VIB funds utilized for Cannon-Grant and Grant's personal expenses, consulting fees paid to Cannon-Grant, compensation paid directly by VIB to Cannon-Grant, and the annual salary paid to Grant by his employer for his full-time job. According to the indictment, beginning in or about May 2020 through 2021, Grant and Cannon-Grant fraudulently applied for PUA benefits, created by Congress in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, that they knew they were not eligible to receive. The defendants allegedly coordinated the submission of false online applications and certifications for PUA funds, concealed their income, used the fraudulently obtained PUA funds to pay for their joint household expenses and other personal expenditures, and created and submitted phony documentation in order to continue receiving weekly PUA

COVID-19 benefits.

Additionally, the defendants allegedly conspired to defraud an Illinois-based mortgage lender when applying for a home mortgage loan in July 2021. Specifically, it is alleged that from in or about May 2021 through July 2021, Grant and Cannon-Grant submitted to the mortgage lender false information and fraudulent documentation that represented VIB assets as personal assets and concealed the fraudulent nature of Grant's PUA income, as well as the fraudulent nature of gift funds Grant received in order to help pay for mortgage fees and closing costs.

If you have information pertaining to the crimes alleged against the defendants, you may contact the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Massachusetts at: (617) 748-3663.

The charges of wire fraud conspiracy each provide for a sentence of up to 20 years in prison, up to three years of supervised release and a fine of up to \$250,000 or twice the gross gain or loss from the offense. The charge of conspiracy provides for a sentence of up to five years in prison, three years of supervised release and a fine of up to \$250,000. The charges of wire fraud each provide for a sentence of up to 20 years in prison, up to three years of supervised release and a fine of up to \$250,000 or twice the gross gain or loss from the offense. The charge of making false statements to a mortgage lending business provides for a sentence of up to 30 years in prison, up to five years of supervised release and a fine of up to \$1 million. Sentences are imposed by a federal district court judge based upon the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and statutes which govern the determination of a sentence in a criminal case.

First Assistant United States Attorney Joshua S. Levy; Massachusetts Inspector General Glenn A. Cunha; Ketty Larco-Ward, Inspector in Charge of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service; Jonathan Mellone, Special Agent in Charge of the U.S.

Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, Labor Racketeering and Fraud Investigation; Joleen D. Simpson, Special Agent in Charge of the Internal Revenue Service's Criminal Investigations in Boston; and Christina Scaringi, Special Agent in Charge of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Inspector General, Northeast Region, made the announcement today. Assistant U.S. Attorneys Dustin Chao and Adam Deitch of the Criminal Division are prosecuting the case.

On May 17, 2021, the Attorney General established the COVID-19 Fraud Enforcement Task Force to marshal the resources of the Department of Justice in partnership with agencies across government to enhance efforts to combat and prevent pandemic-related fraud. The Task Force bolsters efforts to investigate and prosecute the most culpable domestic and international criminal actors and assists agencies tasked with administering relief programs to prevent fraud by, among other methods, augmenting and incorporating existing coordination mechanisms, identifying resources and techniques to uncover fraudulent actors and their schemes, and sharing and harnessing information and insights gained from prior enforcement efforts. For more information on the Department's response to the pandemic, please visit <https://www.justice.gov/coronavirus>.

Anyone with information about allegations of attempted fraud involving COVID-19 can report it by calling the Department of Justice's National Center for Disaster Fraud (NCDF) Hotline at 866-720-5721 or via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>.

The details contained in the indictment are allegations. The defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

Massachusetts Drivers Past “Tipping Point” On Gas Prices

Chris Lisinski

State House News Service

With gas tax relief not favored by Beacon Hill Democrats, average prices at the pump in Massachusetts rose another 19 cents over the past week and analysts remain unsure how long the trend will continue.

AAA Northeast said Monday that the average price for a gallon of gas in Massachusetts is \$4.35 on Monday, 86 cents higher than one month ago and \$1.60 higher than one year ago. The Bay State’s average gas prices are 3 cents higher than the United States as a whole, according to AAA.

A survey AAA published last week found that \$4 per gallon likely represents a “tipping point” for most motorists. About 59 percent of Americans the organization surveyed said they would change their driving habits or lifestyle if the cost for a gallon of gas hit \$4, most of whom said they would choose to drive less. Gas prices have skyrocketed to record levels, driven in part by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and resulting increases in the cost of crude oil. AAA Northeast said the price of crude oil recently fell back below \$110 per barrel after peaking at \$123 per barrel, which might relieve some of the steady pressure on drivers.

“It bears reminding that the cost of oil accounts for about 50% of what drivers pay at the pump,” said AAA Northeast Director of Public and Government Affairs Mary Maguire. “This war is roiling an already tight global oil market and making it hard to determine if we are near a peak for pump prices, or

if they keep grinding higher. It all depends on the direction of oil prices.”

The Massachusetts House last week rejected a proposal from Republican lawmakers to suspend the state’s 24 cents per gallon gas tax until prices fall below \$3.70 a gallon. Speaker Ronald Mariano called the proposal a “stunt,” while Revenue Committee Co-chair Rep. Mark Cusack said his panel is “looking at real relief for families, not political gimmicks.”

Republican Gov. Charlie Baker hinted earlier in the month he may explore gas tax relief but so far has not made a major push or weighed in on the House’s vote.

Massachusetts poised to ban new gasoline-powered vehicles by 2035

By Matt Murphy
State House News Service

In the wake of the Biden administration restoring California’s authority to set vehicle emission standards more stringent than federal rules, Massachusetts is poised to follow that state into a ban on new gasoline-powered vehicles by 2035, potentially setting the stage for the next big fight over how to meet state climate goals.

Massachusetts is one of 16 states that tie themselves to California’s vehicle emission standards, a policy first adopted in 1991 under the Massachusetts Clean Air Act that ensures the state has among the most stringent anti-pollution

regulations on new cars and trucks in the country.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom in 2020 signed an executive order directing state regulators to mandate the sale of only zero-emission vehicles by 2035, and Baker included the policy in his 2050 Decarbonization Roadmap published in December 2020.

“So the commitment for the state of Massachusetts that we will ban sales of internal combustion engines by 2035 is a commitment to which we are wedded,” Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Kathleen Theoharides said last month during a hearing of the Senate Committee on Global Warming and Climate Change.

That position is now being targeted by a coalition of free-market think tanks and advocacy organizations, led locally by the Massachusetts Fiscal Alliance, who believe the state should decouple itself from California.

“For us in Massachusetts, MassFiscal and (Citizens for Limited Taxation) are going to fight pretty hard to make sure motorists have choices and the free market dictates what people want instead of the governor of California,” said Fiscal Alliance spokesman Paul Craney.

Craney helped organize a conference call Thursday with groups representing the six New England states, excluding New Hampshire, who have laws tying their vehicle emission standards to California, describing it as the next big battleground after many of the same groups helped successfully build opposition to the now defunct regional Transportation Climate Initiative. TCI would have attempted to reduce carbon emissions from cars and trucks by putting a declining cap on emissions in participating states.

The new coalition, consisting of 29 groups in 15 of the 16 states tied to California, is looking to spread awareness with the public, media and legislators of what is about to happen in a little more than a decade.

"Citizens don't support autopilot laws," said Chip Ford, executive director of Citizens for Limited Taxation, adding, "We're hoping that we can bring accountability back to any of these laws, especially something as radical as this, banning internal combustion engines."

The Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs did not respond to requests for comment.

The 1970 federal Clean Air Act required states to adhere to federal vehicle emission standards, but granted a waiver to California to set its own rules to deal with smog as long as they were more stringent than the federal standards. Other states were allowed to sign on to either the federal rules or those set by California.

While President Donald Trump rescinded the waiver allowing California to set its own rules, the Environmental Protection Agency on Wednesday restored that authority and with it the rights of states to follow California's lead when it comes to regulating tailpipe emissions.

Nick Murray, of the Maine Policy Institute, said continuing to follow California will put a "substantial economic burden on low- and middle-income Mainers." He also questioned whether the electric grid in New England could handle the demand that would be required for a full transition to electric vehicles by 2035.

"Following California regulations is simply not feasible," Murray said.

Meg Hansen, president of Ethan Allen Institute in Vermont, predicted that a ban on gasoline-powered vehicles would fail in rural states like hers where public transit is not an option and zero-emission technology is "not affordable or readily available."

"Vermont is not a colony of California," Hansen said. "It is

anti-democratic and irrational for Vermont lawmakers to cede regulatory authority over our standards to another state.”

Christian Herb, president of the Connecticut Energy Marketers Association, said the California Air Resources Board has begun the regulatory process to implement Newsom’s executive order and opponents like his organization plan to participate in those proceedings.

More recently in Massachusetts, the Department of Environmental Protection in January developed emergency regulations to immediately adopt California’s Advanced Clean Trucks (ACT) policy, which requires an increasing percentage of trucks sold between model year 2025 and model year 2035 to be zero-emissions vehicles.

The Baker administration has said that in order to reduce emissions by 45 percent below 1990 levels by 2030 the state would need about 1 million of the 5.5 million passenger vehicles projected to be registered in the commonwealth to be zero-emission vehicles, a huge leap from the roughly 36,000 on the road as of January 2021.

Massachusetts Department of Public Health Updates COVID-19 Death Definition

Beginning Monday, March 14, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) will update the criteria used for identifying COVID-19 deaths to align with guidance from the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists. Currently, the COVID death definition includes anyone who has COVID

listed as a cause of death on their death certificate, and any individual who has had a COVID-19 diagnosis within 60 days but does not have COVID listed as a cause of death on their death certificate. The updated definition reduces this timeframe from 60 days to 30 days for individuals without a COVID diagnosis on their death certificate.

The revision follows the recommendation of the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists (CSTE), in collaboration with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), to create a standardized approach for states to use for counting COVID-19 deaths. Several other states are adopting this definition.

Massachusetts has applied this new definition retroactively to the start of the pandemic in March 2020. As a result, 4,081 deaths in Massachusetts that were previously counted as associated with COVID will be removed. In addition, approximately 400 deaths not previously counted but identified through a manual process of matching death certificates with medical records will be added to the COVID-19 death count. The state's overall COVID death count, therefore, will decline by 3,700.

"We are adopting the new definition because we support the need to standardize the way COVID-19-associated deaths are counted," said DPH State Epidemiologist Dr. Catherine Brown. "Prior to the CSTE definition, states did not have a nationally recommended definition for COVID-19 deaths and, as such, have been using a variety of processes and definitions to count their deaths. In Massachusetts, our definition has consistently been broader than most other states. After a deep dive into our data and reviewing thousands of death certificates we recognize that this updated definition gives us a truer picture of mortality associated with COVID-19."

"It is important to understand that we cannot identify all COVID-19 deaths with 100 percent accuracy," said Nicolas

Menzies, Associate Professor of Global Health at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. “The revised definition for COVID-19 deaths is a reasonable balance between sensitivity and specificity and will make it easier to compare Massachusetts death data with data from other jurisdictions.”

“Updating this important metric is a necessary step to help us better gauge the current severity of the pandemic and its impact on our health system and society as a whole,” said Dr. Helen Boucher, Interim Dean of Tufts University School of Medicine, Chief Academic Officer at Tufts Medicine and infectious disease physician at Tufts Medical Center and member of the Governor’s Medical Advisory Board. “The ability to be nimble and quickly adapt to changing circumstances demonstrates Massachusetts’ continued leadership in COVID-19 data reporting and analysis.”

Early in the pandemic, and absent clear national guidance, DPH matched COVID-19 surveillance case information with death certificates to identify deaths in people who tested positive for the virus but did not have COVID listed as a cause of death. To avoid the possibility of missing any COVID-associated death, anyone who tested positive for COVID and died was counted as a COVID-associated death regardless of the length of time between their diagnosis and their death or whether COVID was listed as the cause on their death certificate. This approach was overly broad and led to an overcounting of COVID-19-associated deaths.

Beginning in April 2021, based on the growing knowledge about COVID-19 and an analysis of deaths in Massachusetts up to that point, DPH updated the way it counted deaths. COVID-19-associated deaths still included anyone with COVID-19 listed as a cause of death on the death certificate but DPH also applied a 60-day timeframe from diagnosis to death for anyone diagnosed with COVID-19 but who did not have COVID-19 on the death certificate.

This latest update further reduces the timeframe between diagnosis and death from 60 days to 30 days for individuals without COVID listed on the death certificate. The new definition will be reflected in the COVID-19 interactive dashboard data on Monday, March 14.

Beginning Monday, all calculations involving deaths posted in the COVID-19 dashboard and the raw data file will contain the updated data. Previous raw data files will still be available on the website and will not be updated.

Deaths in long-term care facilities (LTCF) will continue to be reported directly from those facilities, but the updated definition will align surveillance deaths more closely with the LTCF-reported counts.

Several new data points and some changes in functionality and visualizations are also being added to the COVID-19 dashboard, beginning Monday. No data are being eliminated and the changes are designed to enhance the interactive experience for dashboard users and to ensure compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act requirements.

Massachusetts Public Health Reports “Significant Overcount” of COVID Deaths

By Chris Lisinski
State House News Service

When state public health officials publish Monday’s report about the latest COVID-19 impacts on Massachusetts, the

cumulative death toll through two years of the pandemic will suddenly stand about 15 percent lower.

The Baker administration will start using a new public health surveillance definition next week, narrowing the window of time between a confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis and death required for the fatality to get attributed to the highly infectious virus.

Saying the Bay State's earlier methodology led to a "significant overcount of deaths," officials said Thursday they will adopt a new system recommended by the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists.

And in a step that could reshape understanding of the pandemic's impact on Massachusetts, the administration will apply the new method retroactively, resulting in 4,081 deaths once linked to the virus being recategorized as stemming from other causes and roughly 400 others newly being labeled as COVID-19 deaths.

"We think this is an absolutely critical step in improving our understanding of who COVID has impacted most significantly during the pandemic," said state epidemiologist Dr. Catherine Brown. "We believe that this will provide us a much more accurate picture of who has died associated with a COVID infection in Massachusetts, and it will also improve our ability to compare our data with data from other jurisdictions."

For the duration of the pandemic, state officials have deemed a fatality COVID-related if it met at least one of three criteria: if a case investigation determined the virus "caused" or "contributed" to the death, if the death certificate listed COVID-19 or an "equivalent term" as the cause, or if state public health surveillance linked a confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis to a Bay Stater's death.

The first two measures remain unchanged since the earliest

days of the crisis, but the third has already been updated once and is set to evolve again on Monday.

From March 2020 to March 2021, DPH counted the death of any person who had previously tested positive for COVID-19 as a COVID-related death, regardless of how much time elapsed between those two events.

Even if someone contracted the virus in March and died in a car crash in July, they were added to the ongoing tally of pandemic deaths for that first year.

“This strategy worked well at the beginning of the pandemic, and in fact, a paper was published last summer in the Journal of the American Medical Association, which lauded our efforts here in Massachusetts in counting deaths that occurred during the first wave of the pandemic as opposed to several other jurisdictions,” said Public Health Commissioner Margret Cooke. “But over time, our approach proved to be too expansive and led to a significant overcount of deaths in Massachusetts. People who had gotten COVID earlier in 2020 and died for other reasons ended up still being included in COVID-associated death counts.”

The department updated its approach for the third criterion in April 2021, officials said Thursday, keeping the death investigation and death certificate triggers in place. Under that method, officials counted only those who died within 60 days of a COVID diagnosis as deaths related to the virus, unless their death was clearly linked to another cause such as trauma.

That system remained in place for most of 2021 and will be replaced in Monday’s daily report by the new definition, recommended in December by the national consortium of state public health leaders after months of study.

The new method suggested by the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists calls for counting deaths within

30 days of a COVID-19 diagnosis where “natural causes” is labeled on a death certificate as attributable to the virus, half as long a timeframe as under the most recent definition in Massachusetts.

Brown said the update will “make sure that what we are capturing is the acute impact of COVID.”

“People who are seriously ill and hospitalized for longer and end up dying after that 30 days have almost invariably had COVID listed on their death certificate, so they end up being counted under another method,” Brown said.

As has been the case throughout the pandemic, if an official death investigation determined the virus caused or contributed or if a death certificate lists COVID-19 or an equivalent term, that fatality will add to the pandemic death toll.

Brown said the vast majority of the 4,081 deaths that will no longer be deemed COVID-related, about 95 percent, occurred between May 2020 and May 2021, covering the tail end of the state’s first surge and its second surge that winter. Most of the roughly 400 deaths that will acquire a COVID label also happened in that span, Brown said.

Taken together, the removals and additions net out to a reduction in the cumulative COVID-19 death toll of about 3,700 people, more than the entire population of Provincetown.

DPH does not expect to have a new tally for the number of COVID-19 deaths in Massachusetts until it publishes new data on its COVID-19 dashboard around 5 p.m. on Monday. Back-end work to merge datasets will take place over the weekend, according to Brown.

It also remains unclear if the change in Massachusetts will send out ripple effects across the country.

Asked if other states planned to adopt the national council’s

recommended methodology as well, Brown said that the new definition planned for rollout in Massachusetts is “actually much more consistent with what many other jurisdictions are already using.”

“This is a recommended guidance definition, and it is designed to help improve comparability across jurisdictions, across states. But we have also heard from a few jurisdictions that they are not planning on updating the way they count deaths,” she said. “What’s really important is that this change to the definition will actually increase the ability to compare the counts in Massachusetts with other jurisdictions because it will be more similar to what most other jurisdictions are using.”

The U.S. Center and Disease Control’s online tracker on Thursday listed 959,533 total COVID-19 deaths across the country since Jan. 21, 2020. Massachusetts had the 13th-most total deaths among states and the 11th-highest rate of deaths per 100,000 residents, both of which will likely change when the updated death toll is published next week.

As of 5 p.m. Wednesday, Massachusetts health officials had recorded 23,708 confirmed and probable COVID-19 deaths since the outbreak first began, so that figure is likely to drop to around 20,000 on Monday.

The new methodology will also apply to weekly reporting about COVID-19 cases in vaccinated individuals, the next version of which is set for publication on Tuesday.

Brown added that preliminary analysis did not show any significant changes to the distribution of deaths by age group, sex and race or ethnicity once the new definition was applied.

“While we absolutely acknowledge that we’re moving to a more accurate and appropriate way to count deaths, it doesn’t change our understanding, it does not alter our understanding,

of who has died from COVID and where the most disproportionate impacts have been,” Brown said.

The Baker administration appears not to have made as public an announcement about the first change to its statewide COVID-19 death definition as the latest update. Officials said in April 2021 that they would change how deaths were counted specifically in long-term care facilities to align with the CDC’s national definition, but made no mention in that press release of the broader change imposing a 60-day limit on the span between an infection and death to count in some cases.

Baker voices concerns about undocumented immigrant drivers’ license bill

Matt Murphy

State House News Service

As he waits to see how the Senate will respond to legislation that would allow immigrants unable to prove lawful residence in Massachusetts to obtain drivers’ licenses, Gov. Charlie Baker voiced his concern Thursday that the House-passed bill did not adequately protect against someone unlawfully registering to vote.

The House last month passed a bill that would allow so-called undocumented immigrants to apply for a driver’s license if they can produce certain papers proving their identity and residence in Massachusetts, such as a foreign passport.

“This license we’re talking about is not a privilege-to-drive

card, which is what they have in a bunch of other states. It looks exactly like a Massachusetts driver's license. You can't tell the difference between this and a regular one," Baker said during an hour-long appearance on GBH's Boston Public Radio.

Baker has opposed the concept, but said Thursday he did not want to comment on legislation that not yet been finalized. The governor did say he was disappointed the House voted down (31-125) a Minority Leader Brad Jones amendment that would have required the Registry of Motor Vehicles to share information with municipal clerks looking to verify a license holders' eligibility to vote.

"That bothered me a lot," Baker said. "I really think this is an issue we have to make clear. Driver's license is one thing. The right to vote is something else."

The House added language to its final bill to clarify that a license or learner's permit applicant who does not provide proof of lawful presence will not be not automatically registered to vote under the state's automatic voter-registration law. But Baker suggested he does not think this goes far enough.

"We got to create a process that somehow separates people who are citizens from people who aren't who are applying for this driver's license," Baker said.

Senate President Karen Spilka supports giving licenses to undocumented immigrants, but said Sen. Brendan Creighton is still taking the temperature of senators on the issue and she hopes to bring it up for a vote "within the coming weeks."

"I don't know exactly how many weeks, if it's going to be several or a few or whatever, but hoping to bring it to the floor," Spilka said.

The House passed the bill by a veto-proof majority.

New Bedford Suspends COVID Vaccination/Testing Policy For Municipal Employees

Due to a precipitous decline in the number of COVID cases locally, the City of New Bedford is suspending its COVID vaccination/testing policy for municipal employees.

Earlier today, Mayor Jon Mitchell directed the City's Personnel Office to cease implementation and enforcement of the City's COVID vaccination/testing policy across city government, effective immediately. Employees who had chosen to comply with the policy by producing a negative COVID test on a weekly basis will no longer be required to do so, and new employees will not be required to submit proof of vaccination going forward.

COVID cases in New Bedford have fallen dramatically over the past several weeks. The City hit its peak of daily cases on January 7, when 562 cases were reported over the previous day. As of Monday, February 28, the City is seeing an average of 23 cases per day over the past week—a 96% decline in cases from the January peak.

The City of New Bedford's employee vaccination/testing policy was first announced in August 2021, negotiated with employee unions in the fall, and implemented on November 15 for most of the City's approximately 1,100 non-school employees. The primary goal of the policy was to protect residents and staff, as well as set an example for public and private employers in Greater New Bedford. 825 City employees subject to the policy were recorded as fully vaccinated—a rate of 74 percent,

compared to New Bedford's general population vaccination rate of about 57 percent.

More than 200 employees chose to comply through weekly testing. In many instances, the weekly tests revealed COVID infections that would have otherwise gone undiagnosed. As a result, COVID-positive employees were prevented from coming into work and likely infecting colleagues or residents with whom they would have interacted.

No City employees were terminated or issued disciplinary suspensions for non-compliance with the policy. In some instances, employees who failed to supply timely testing results were denied entry to the workplace until test results were submitted. In these cases, employees had their accrued personal or vacation time reduced accordingly.

The City will continue to honor the employee benefits negotiated in agreements with the Police, Fire, AFSCME unions during 2021. The City reserves the right to reinstitute the vaccination and testing policy should a new COVID-related public health threat emerge in the future.

The New Bedford Health Department will also continue to focus on other aspects of the pandemic response, including the promotion of vaccinations and boosters which continue to be highly effective at preventing severe COVID outcomes. The Health Department will also continue to monitor transmission risk and the emergence of new variants that could require additional safeguards.

Baker: Massachusetts Stands With Ukraine Against “Tyrant’s War”

Colin A. Young

State House News Service

The invasion of Ukraine that Russian President Vladimir Putin is leading is a “tyrant’s war” that must be met with swift and strong action from the rest of the free world, Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker said Thursday.

“The commonwealth of Massachusetts stands with the free democratic nation of Ukraine. And I’m quite sure that the people of Massachusetts stand with the men, women and children of Ukraine as well. And that’s because the people of Ukraine, like all people the world over, if given the chance choose to live peacefully in an open and free society,” Baker said at the start of a winter storm press conference. “One man’s actions, the actions of a tyrant, now put that all at risk and millions of innocent lives in jeopardy.”

Russia lobbed missiles and artillery fire into Ukraine before dawn there Thursday and then moved air and ground forces into the sovereign nation as part of what Putin claimed was a “special military operation” meant to “demilitarize” and “denazify” Ukraine. It came after weeks of escalation and incredible claims of Ukrainian attacks on Russian supporters.

After huddling with other G7 leaders Thursday morning, President Joe Biden announced new sanctions against Russian institutions and a number of oligarchs. “History is littered with tyrants and despots who chose similar evil paths of destruction and each time, thankfully, there are powerful forces unwilling to stand by and do nothing. There’s no question that America, NATO and every nation that purports to

value their sovereignty and the safety of their people must respond to this evil act,” the governor said. Earlier Thursday, about 100 people rallied outside the State House to show their support for the people of Ukraine and to demonstrate against the violence, WBUR reported.

Sex Offender Sentenced to 45 Years in Prison for Attempted Production of Child Pornography

A New Jersey man was sentenced this week in federal court in Worcester in connection with attempting to produce child pornography.

Jordan Winczuk, 36, of Bellmawr, N.J., was sentenced by U.S. District Court Judge Timothy S. Hillman to 45 years in prison and five years of supervised release. On Oct. 27, 2021, Winczuk pleaded guilty to one count of attempted sexual exploitation of a minor and one count of commission of a felony offense involving the sexual exploitation of minor as a registered sex offender.

“While on parole for a previous child exploitation conviction, Mr. Winczuk again sought to sexualize and harm another child. Now, this predator is a federal prisoner,” said United States Attorney Rachael S. Rollins. “Today’s sentence illustrates my office’s unwavering commitment to prosecute those who seek to sexualize and harm our children. Through deception and lies, this Level 3 sex offender sought to rob another child of their innocence. Our exceptional law enforcement partners made sure

that didn't happen."

"Jordan Winczuk repeatedly exploited the innocence of children by portraying himself as someone they could trust. Today's sentence ensures this danger to society can never sexually exploit another child again," said Joseph R. Bonavolonta, Special Agent in Charge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Boston Division. "While Mr. Winczuk is behind bars, his victims will try to recover from the emotional scars he left them with, and the FBI will continue to work with our law enforcement partners to investigate and bring to justice others like him who are intent on harming children."

In January 2018, Winczuk, a Level 3 sex offender, contacted a Worcester boy through social media. Over a period of weeks, Winczuk attempted to convince the victim, who had disclosed that he was only 11 years old, to photograph his genitals and send those pictures to Winczuk via Instagram. During his contact with the victim, over a period of weeks, Winczuk posed as a 13-year-old girl, the brother of the purported teenage girl and as a first responder in efforts to influence the victim to send photos of himself. In February 2018, a search of Winczuk's New Jersey residence recovered cell phones that contained child pornography and included multiple conversations in which he requested sexually explicit images from other apparent minors. At the time, Winczuk was on parole following a state conviction in New Jersey for sexually assaulting a boy and endangering the welfare of a child through the distribution of child pornography.

U.S. Attorney Rollins; FBI SAC Bonavolonta; and Worcester Police Chief Steven M. Sargent made the announcement today. Valuable assistance was provided by Homeland Security Investigations, the New Jersey State Police and the New Jersey State Parole Board. Assistant U.S. Attorneys Kristen M. Noto and Danial Bennett of Rollins' Worcester Branch Office prosecuted the case.

This case was brought as part of Project Safe Childhood, a nationwide initiative to combat the growing epidemic of child sexual exploitation and abuse, launched in May 2006 by the Department of Justice. Led by U.S. Attorneys' offices and CEOs, Project Safe Childhood marshals federal, state and local resources to locate, apprehend and prosecute individuals who exploit children via the Internet, as well as to identify and rescue victims. For more information about Project Safe Childhood, please visit www.projectsafechildhood.gov.

Massachusetts Senate backs two bills that would observe “Emancipation Day” and “Negro Election Day”

The Senate approved two bills on Thursday that would have the state observe two black-history relate days. One bill filed by Representative Michelle L. Ciccolo (D), bill H.3117 would declare July 8 as Massachusetts Emancipation Day or Quock Walker Day, and the second bill S 2703, filed by Senator Joan B. Lovely (D) would designate the third Saturday in July as Negro Election Day.

“Emancipation Day” would honor Quock Walker, whose 1783 case before the Supreme Judicial Court established the legal precedent that slavery was in direct conflict with Massachusetts' newly-minted Constitution and was therefore unconstitutional.

“Negro Election Day” would recognize the adoption of the first black voting system which took place in 1740 when enslaved

people in Massachusetts would hold an annual election to choose their own king or governor.