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Tyler Morning Telegraph

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Vaccines urged amid measles outbreak

LEEZA MEYER

Texas-based medical experts are urging parents to update their children’s vaccinations amid the nationwide measles outbreak. The United States is facing the highest number of confirmed measles cases in over 30 years, already exceeding the total number of cases in 2025.

The Texas Medical Association (TMA), the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS)

and Christus representatives ask parents with children older than 12 months to ensure they have received doses of the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine to slow the spread of the deadly viral respiratory disease.

As of July 31, there are 2,371 confirmed measles cases reported in the United States and 190 cases in Texas, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Texas currently ranks third in the U.S. for

the most measles cases just under Utah and South Carolina.

Overall in Texas, 93.2% of the 378,860 population are vaccinated against measles. Two doses of the measles vaccine are 97% effective at avoiding the disease, according to the CDC.

According to the DSHS, Smith County currently does not have any confirmed cases, but in the greater East Texas area, Upshur

MEASLES >> PAGE 2A



Diana Dur, public health nurse, works at a mobile vaccination clinic in Upper Darby in July. (Jessica Griffin/TNS)

Data center boom halted

Moratorium issued on approval of centers until audits completed

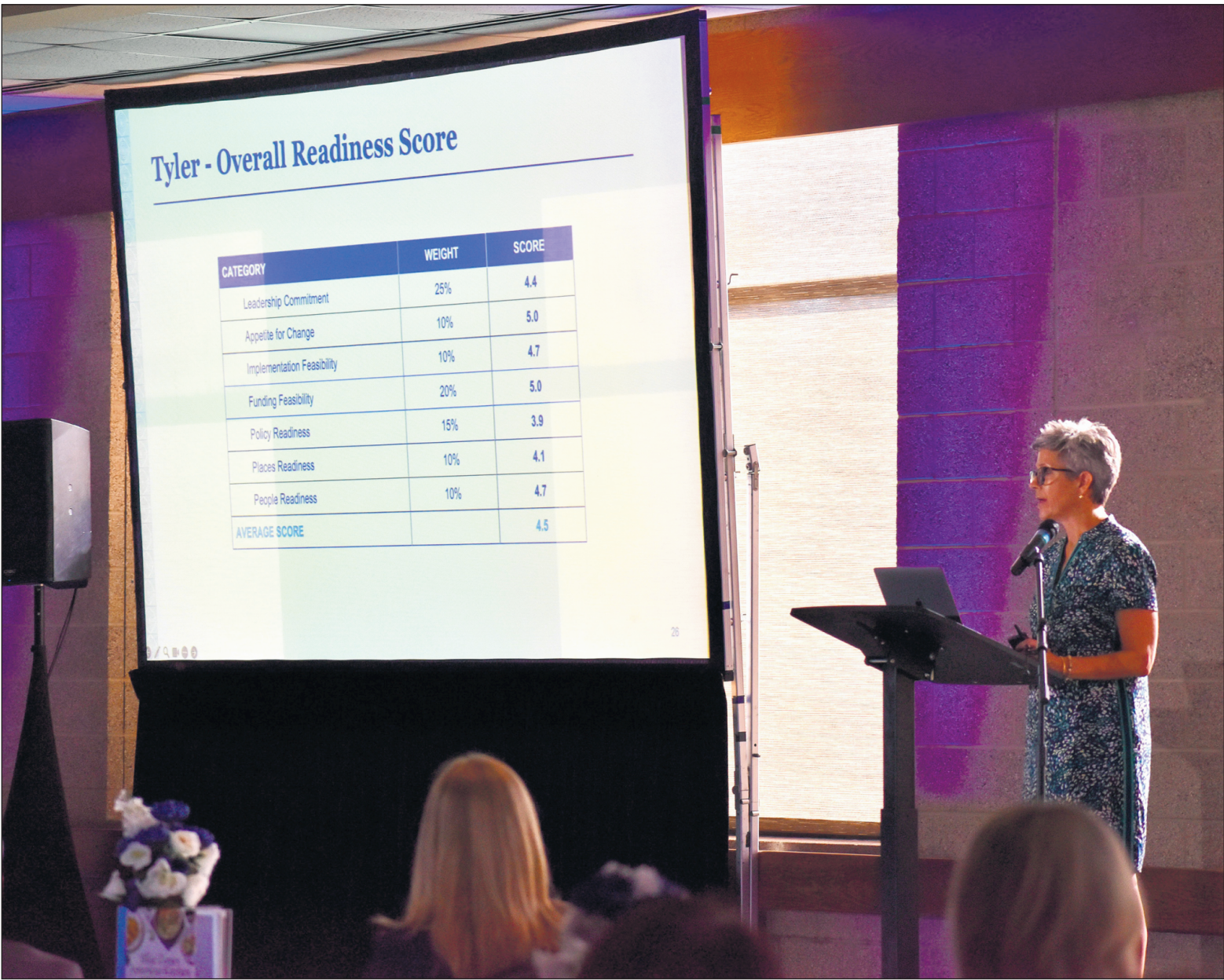
PAUL COBLER AND
ALEJANDRA MARTINEZ
The Texas Tribune

Amid growing public backlash to the rapid build-out of data centers across Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott on Monday announced a moratorium on the approval of data centers until regulatory agencies can audit proposed data centers seeking connection to the state’s electric grid.

It is unclear how long the audit will take, but the effort is Abbott’s strongest effort yet to slow the development of these data centers statewide and underscores how little information members of the public, including state leaders, know about the facilities.

Abbott is asking the Public Utility Commission of Texas and the Electric Reliability Council of Texas to ensure data center

DATA CENTER >>
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Lisle Wescott, senior vice president of transformation for Blue Zones, makes a presentation during Blue Zone’s Tyler Assessment results meeting on June 29. (Leeza Meyer/Tyler Morning Telegraph)

‘A Different Destiny’

Organizations launch six-year quality of life transformation project in Tyler

LEEZA MEYER

The City of Tyler is ready to implement a six-year project to improve the long-term health and well-being of the community, the Health Foundation of East Texas partnering with Blue Zones health organization recently announced.

City, county, and community leaders, stakeholders and residents gathered June 29 inside of Tyler Rose Garden Center to learn about the results of the Blue Zones Community Assessment, a six-month comprehensive evaluation that identified opportunities to improve the health and quality of life for the City of Tyler. Tyler received a 4.5 out of 5 for readiness for a Blue Zone’s transformation project, which is funded by

the Health Foundation of East Texas. The Ignite Tyler plan includes community-wide changes to make healthy choices easier.

Dan Buettner Jr., executive vice president and chief development officer of Blue Zones, said the organization completes a readiness assessment to ensure a city and Blue Zones are a good match before beginning the project process.

“This is not magic,” Buettner said. “This is hard work. This is good old-fashioned roll up your sleeves elbow grease at work, hence the readiness, hence the database. Hopefully from just this little six-month period of time, those of you who have been involved have gotten a sense of the rigor that we

BLUE ZONES >> PAGE 2A



Tyler Mayor Stuart Hene, left, and Health Foundation of East Texas President Dr. Paula Anthony listen during a Blue Zones presentation last week in Tyler. (Leeza Meyer/Tyler Morning Telegraph)

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“This is what the Lord says, he who made the earth, the Lord who formed it and established it — the Lord is his name: Call to me, and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.: (Jeremiah 33:2-3)

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A t-storm aroun in the p.m.
See the Tyler-East Texas 3-day forecast on **Page 3A**.

Weather
High **99**
Low **79**

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Blue Zones

From Page 1A

put into this and the orientation towards action.”

BLUE ZONES

Blue Zones LLC, a well-being and public-health organization, was founded by Dan Buettner, National Geographic Explorer and Fellow, Emmy-award winning journalist and father of Buettner Jr., in 2008 after his extensive research on communities across the globe with high longevity. Utilizing that research, Buettner and his team discovered each hotspot community or “blue zone” shared nine specific lifestyle habits he called the “Power 9” that are now being implemented into other cities through transformation projects, according to the Blue Zones website.

“Our services organization spent the last 20 years or so really doing deep research about health and longevity, learning from those longevity hotspots and our purpose is to empower everyone everywhere to live better longer,” said Lisle Wescott, senior vice president of transformation for Blue Zones. “Our promise is more good years, so not just adding years onto your life, but adding more good years, and I think we can all get behind that.”

POWER 9

The Power 9 include:

1. Move Naturally
2. Purpose
3. Downshift
4. 80% Rule
5. Plant Slant
6. Wine at 5
7. Belong
8. Loved Ones First
9. Right Tribe

“Most times in the United States, people think about health and well-being through the lens of diet and exercise and that is true as part of our nine commonalities,” Wescott said. “It’s moving naturally, eating wisely, but also about deeply connecting to your people by establishing social networks that reduce isolation and stress through having a right outlook, knowing deeply why you get up each and every day and how to fulfill your purpose in the community.”

Every hotspot community incorporates natural movement for exercise, individuals have a purpose that contributes back to their community, they take moments of peace every day, they stop eating after their stomachs are around 80% full and their diets consist of mainly beans and lentils, while only eating meat on average around five times per month. The research also found that all the Blue Zones drink wine moderately and regularly, belong to some type of faith-based community, put family first and either live with grandparents or invest



County Judge Neal Franklin listens during the Blue Zones presentation. (Leeza Meyer/Tyler Morning Telegraph)

in their children’s lives, and create or were born into social circles that support healthy behaviors.

“The solution model that we have, which we call our Life Radius Model, takes those nine commonalities and it applies it to the places that we live, work, learn and play,” Wescott said. “I tend to get my services or experience my community within a 20-mile radius, so it’s designing the environment to get a critical mass of people engaging in making the healthy choice the easy choice... which is really that permanent change and that opportunity to continue to impact your environment for many years to come.”

Wescott said Blue Zone’s key focuses are on community goals rather than individualism. The organization focuses on people with social connection, volunteerism, community engagement and mental health, on places such as schools, workplaces, restaurants, grocery stores and neighborhoods and policies such as walkability, food access, pedestrian safety, tobacco and alcohol policies and community planning.

ASSESSMENT PROCESS AND FINDINGS

Blue Zones spent six months assessing Tyler’s readiness for a transformation project.

The assessment included community meetings, focus groups, leadership interviews, data analysis and surveys of more than 2,000 past and current Tyler residents.

“I hope you get a sense that we’re not recommending one intervention like a bike lane or school ambassadors,” Buettner said. “It’s all the

things happening at once.”

Buettner said the assessment identified Tyler’s greatest strengths to be strong civic leadership and collaboration, active non-profit and faith-based organizations, major health-care systems, strong school districts and local parks and outdoor space, growing economy and business sectors, and residents who care deeply about improving the community.

“One thing we’ve learned about Tyler is your growth,” Buettner said. “One of the fastest growing regions in the state and in the county and you’re perfectly situated between Houston, Fort Worth, Shreveport and Dallas. People are moving here for that.”

Buettner said although Tyler has many great qualities that resulted in the 4.5 readiness score, the major areas of concern include that the overall life satisfaction declined since the COVID-19 pandemic such as positive emotions such as joy, purpose and optimism decreased, while stress, worry and loneliness have increased. Youth well-being declined significantly, while older adults’ well-being scales increased, creating a growing generational divide and chronic disease continues to place burdens on communities.

Wescott said it is common to see an overall spike in lower quality of life, especially after the pandemic due to many different economic and governmental factors, but the level is unsustainable for a healthy population.

“It’s not surprising, but it’s noteworthy,” Wescott said. “What that tells us is that there was a state

of well-being prior to and that perhaps, there wasn’t enough infrastructure built in, in terms of a connective or coordinated plan, to ensure the community could remain resilient in times of distress.”

Wescott said a community transformation project helps communities build resilience because the environment is set up to make healthy choices and connect communities. She said Blue Zones can help with what they can control by working with local and state governments.

“Chronic disease is not destiny, it’s a decision,” Buettner said. “I believe here today, Tyler is making the decision to have a different destiny and Blue Zones is proud and honored to be your partner for this new national demonstration.”

Smittee Root, executive director of Health Foundation of East Texas, helped set up the Blue Zones partnership and said she understands every community has challenges, but there are ways to mitigate them.

“What sets Tyler apart, and I hope what our Blue Zones friends have been seeing, is the people, not only in this room, but the people in our community, we can do really big things,” Root said. “What we heard throughout this process is that we care deeply about this community, our families, our future, each other, being connected, and we want to do great things. So, while today is the final line of our assessment period, it is the starting point for the real work.”

PROPOSED INITIATIVES AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Examples of proposed initiatives that Buettner

and Wescott mentioned in the meeting include:

- The creation of a centralized volunteer platform.
- Expand youth wellness and resilience programs.
- Establish student wellness leadership groups.
- Strengthen workplace wellness initiatives.
- Increasing healthy food options in grocery stores and restaurants.
- Improve walkability, shade, trails and wayfinding.
- Expand access to healthy foods in underserved areas.
- Encourage healthier vending machine and catering policies.
- Promote neighborhood and community gathering spaces and more.

“I think that over 10 years together, we could reduce the cumulative average risk in Tyler by 18%,” Buettner said. “The translation of that is about \$500 million in avoided medical cost and boosted productivity. Everybody captures the value. It’s a value of the commons.”

Buettner said small changes that add up over time improve workforce productivity, reduce sick days and employee turnover, and strengthen Tyler’s attractiveness to businesses and new residents.

“We know well-being can be measured and interventions can be designed to move your needle on well-being,” Buettner said. “We know that small changes have a big effect and big swings have a generational

effect.”

The implementation plan will occur in two phases. Phase 1 will last around nine to 12 months which will encompass hiring local staff, building partnerships, recruiting volunteers and ambassadors, conducting a comprehensive community survey, developing a detailed community blueprint and launching the initiative publicly.”

Phase 2 will occur over five years through engaging at least 15% of residents, working with schools, employers, restaurants, grocery stores and community organizations, implementing environmental and policy changes, measuring progress annually and working toward a Blue Zones community certification.

“There’s an opportunity to move from plan to implementation, to take that vision and the things that we’ve seen and put it into implementation,” Wescott said. “Blue Zones believes that in our case, in our experience with communities across the United States that we act as a neutral committee-er. You may think, ‘Why hasn’t some of this happened before?’ and it’s hard because usually well-being is the 10th project on someone’s desk, so Blue Zones can come in and take the burden of who’s going to fund this and whose job it is going to be.”

Tyler Mayor Stuart Hene said quality of life remains an extremely important asset to him and to the City of Tyler and he is extremely honored and proud to have the opportunity to work with Blue Zones.

“The question we can ask ourselves is not what can I be doing, but what will I be doing to make my life better, to make my life longer, and that goes for everyone in our community,” Hene said. “It could be as simple as taking a 15-minute break at your office and walking around the block, so it’s little tweaks that we can make that turn into changes.”

Wescott and Buettner said Blue Zones believes Tyler has the leadership, partnerships and community support to become a national model for improving health and quality of life.

“When I think about an opportunity in Tyler to reduce that disparity and truly ensure that everyone in Tyler has the opportunity to live, not just add more years but to add more life to their years is super exciting,” Wescott said. “That’s why I keep doing this work in communities all across the U.S. It’s an actual demonstration that you can reverse engineer the community to get better and more healthy years.”

For more information about Blue Zones’ plan for the City of Tyler, visit www.bluezones.com/ignite-tyler.

Measles

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County has one confirmed case, Montgomery County has four, and Rockwall County has six.

Dr. Hector Ocaranza, chair of the TMA Council on Science and Public Health, said when children get their shots, they also help defend those who are immunocompromised or too young to be vaccinated against preventable diseases.

“Vaccinations help keep your child healthy and help keep the rest of the classroom and school healthy too,” Ocaranza said.

Measles is caused by

the measles virus which is highly contagious through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes and can linger up to two hours in the air after an individual has left a room. The virus causes a high fever, cough, runny nose, rash, pink eye and in some cases, severe complications such as swelling in the brain and pneumonia, according to the CDC. Children under the age of 5 are the most susceptible to the virus.

Dr. Evelyn Chou, family medicine physician at Christus Trinity Clinic, reminds parents continuously of the importance of vaccinating their children, even with vaccines that

are not required by public schools.

“Every single vaccine that we give, from when they are young to older, are the ones that you need to have or are recommended before you can go to public school by the HHS (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services),” Chou said. “There’s just a couple of them as you get older, like the yearly flu shot, that are optional.”

Chou said guardians should stay on top of their children’s vaccinations throughout the year to be diligent about their safety.

“It should be an ongoing thing,” Chou said. “I think school is a good remind-

er of, ‘Oh, let’s make sure you’ve been to the doctor this year,’ and that type of thing, but honestly you can get your physical at any time.”

DSHS data show the number of kindergarteners vaccinated with the MMR vaccine increased slightly 0.06% in the 2025-26 school year. However, the number of seventh-graders vaccinated with the MMR vaccine declined 0.12% in the same time frame.

Children ages 4 to 6 years old should get their second dose of the MMR vaccine to fully protect themselves from the virus, Ocaranza said.

“The greatest success

of vaccines is that parents do not see diseases anymore that we have been able to prevent,” Ocaranza said. “In the U.S., diseases like polio have been eradicated because of the widespread use of effective vaccines. Tell your doctor about your doubts, your fears. We as parents want to protect our children.”

Measles was declared eradicated from the U.S. in 2000, but came back in early 2025, due to a decrease in individuals getting the MMR vaccine leading to widespread outbreaks.

“If you have any questions or if you read something online, talk to your physician,” Ocaranza said.

“They can translate science into something that is very easily understandable.”

Researchers are still working to estimate the size of the state’s 2025 outbreak, and the Associated Press reported that early findings show it might have been nearly twice the size of the 762 known cases.

For a full list of required back-to-school vaccinations, visit the DSHS website at www.dshs.texas.gov/immunizations/school/requirements.

For updates on the measles outbreak, visit the CDC at www.cdc.gov/measles/data-research/index.html.

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