

## CT set to start youth vaccinations

COVID-19 inoculations of those 12-15 likely to begin Thursday

Comprehensive coverage  
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By Ken Dixon

Connecticut health providers are preparing to inoculate 12- to-15-year-olds for COVID-19 this week, immediately after final authorization of the Pfizer vaccine by the U.S. Food & Drug Administration, which declared it safe

► **Nation/World:** Pfizer vaccine expands to kids as young as 12. **A8**

for that age group late Monday.

An FDA committee is expected to give final authorization Wednesday and providers in Connecti-

cut would not delay in administering the inoculations.

Gov. Ned Lamont said Monday that school officials will roll out notifications to parents when the vaccines will be available.

"The vaccines are working," Lamont said, adding that 57 percent of the 3.5

million people in the state have been vaccinated. "We've got to still keep our pedal to the metal on this," Lamont said.

Each health care provider administering vaccines to young teens would be responsible for setting its own policy on how to

See *Vaccine* on A6

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Peter Hvizdak / Hearst Connecticut Media

Daniel Trzcinski of Shelton, a chef, musician and culinary arts teacher, has created a business, "Cooking and Chords," with the help of Barbara Grasso of Newtown. They are hired to go to a home to make and serve dinner, clean up after dinner and then entertain their clients with the music of his guitar and singing voice.

## Catering to music lovers

Meet the Connecticut chef who's striking a chord at dinner parties

By Pam McLoughlin

SHELTON — If you've ever fantasized about throwing a dinner party at home where there's live music and someone else to do the shopping, cooking and cleanup — your prince is for hire.

Former restaurant owner Daniel Trzcinski, a culinary instructor at Ridgefield High School and singer/acoustic guitar artist who performs professionally, has combined his love of culinary arts and music in a new business, "Cooking and Chords."

The service, as he says, allows hosts to be "a guest at their own event."

"If you're stirring the sauce, watching the chicken and making the salad, how can you visit with guests?" he said.

Trzcinski developed the business during the pandemic with his love/business partner Barbara Grasso, of Newtown, a paralegal by day. So far,

See *Chef* on A7



Daniel Trzcinski, of Shelton, sings as Barbara Grasso of Newtown looks on.

## Lamont tries to avert nursing home strike

Governor puts up \$280M in hopes of preventing walkout

By Julia Bergman

Gov. Ned Lamont is offering up an additional \$150 million in Medicaid funding to the nursing home industry, an increase of 4.5 percent for wage increases for workers in each of the next two years, in hopes of quelling the impending strike of thousands of employees Friday morning.

"We're trying to do anything we can to avoid a strike," Lamont said late Monday afternoon, asked at his coronavirus briefing where strike negotiations stood.

Earlier in the day, his administration put forth "an aggressive proposal," he said, which, in addition to the \$150 million increase, would temporarily boost Medicaid reimbursement by 10 percent for a total of \$86 million, and add \$32 million in hazard pay and retirement enhancements.

"There's nothing more important than taking care of our seniors," Lamont said, "and I hope to God the nurses are there to do it."

The Lamont administration is not a direct party in negotiations between the union and nursing home operators over a new contract. But as the major payer through the state-federal Medicaid system,

See *Strike* on A4

## State to take requests for commutations after 2-year halt

By Ben Lambert

NEW HAVEN — The state Board of Pardons and Parole for more than two years effectively ceased hearing inmates' requests to have their sentences commuted, in part due to what an official said is an ongoing review of its application processes.

While the process now is expected to get rebooted this summer with changes in eligibility and the application process, the delay meant inmates did not have an opportunity to be heard, defense attorney Alex Taubes said.

See *Commute* on A7



says John Torres, director of the Bridgeport Caribe Youth Leaders, into the camera. "Trials with more than 70,000 people have shown that both vaccines are safe and effective."

Alma Maya, the city's former

been known a long time in the community and are trusted by many."

This type of community outreach is hardly novel. For months, Black and Hispanic leaders, in-

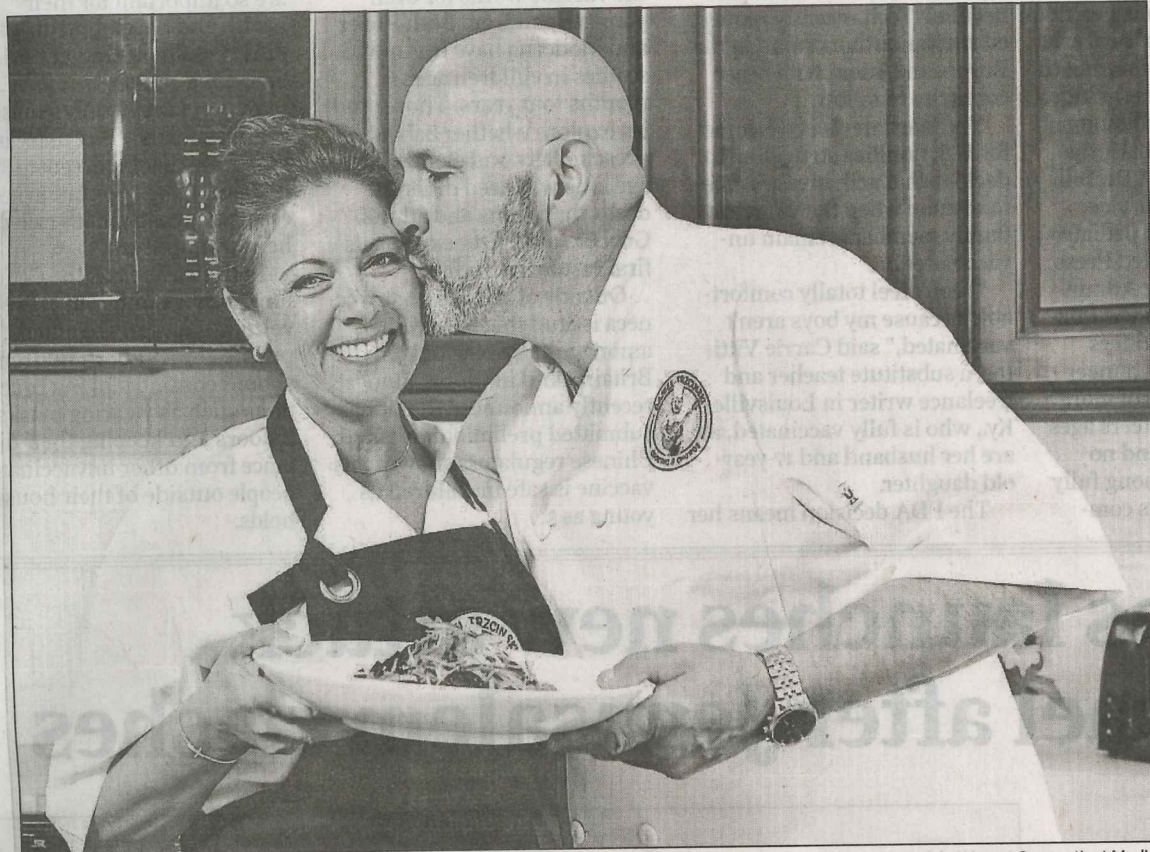
125,000 Johnson and Johnson doses but is not ordering more because of low demand, health officials said.

Diaz said he also believes the state's decision to start lifting many

White said. "If the concept of (vaccine) safety is no longer relevant or hearing it's important to me, healthwise, is no longer relevant, what is?"

She said the city's more recent

"We want to keep the conversation going," Martinez said. "Although Connecticut is in a good place (with COVID cases), we want to make sure we don't let off the gas."



Peter Hvizdak / Hearst Connecticut Media

**Daniel Trzcinski, of Shelton, a chef, musician and culinary arts teacher, has created a business, "Cooking and Chords" with the help of Barbara Grasso of Newtown. They are hired to go to a home to make and serve dinner, clean up after dinner and then entertain their clients with the music of his guitar and singing voice.**

## CHEF

From page A1

they've done three events and have two more booked.

"A lot of couples can't work together, but Barb and I click on so many different levels," he said of Grasso, whom he met about a year ago. "Barb is my ideal customer. She wants to entertain, but she's busy and doesn't want to do the prep work."

The couple does parties for up to 20 — it's not a catering business — and prices vary widely, but it's not cheap.

It's about \$2,000 for the couple to walk through the door for a party of up to 10 people, plus the price of food. Trzcinski meets with customers ahead to plan, design the menu and follow any theme.

Client Tracy Hoekenga of Newtown hired Cooking and Chords for her mother's 70th birthday on her patio last summer and it was such a hit she hired them two months later for her father-in-law's 73rd.

Hoekenga, who didn't want to hold the celebrations in a restaurant during the pandemic, said she thought the service was pricey at first, but the experience was so "perfect" she said it was worth every penny.

"We got to experience a close and personal day," she said. "I thought, 'I can't believe this food came out of my kitchen.'"

Hoekenga said Trzcinski was "warm and engaging," and the food was scrumptious that her father-in-law ate a full plate of food to her mother-in-law's out loud amazement.

Trzcinski played the guitar and sang James Taylor and other soft rock songs her mother loves and even broke out the Christian music for her father-in-law at his farm. The family sang along.

She said he also happily answered questions as family popped in and out of the kitchen.

Between the two parties they had grilled pizza, glazed pork chops (her mom's request), pan seared ahi tuna with a seaweed

and ponzu sauce, grilled eggplant with mozzarella and bruschetta, Brussels sprouts with pancetta, watermelon salad, French toast bread pudding with maple caramel sauce; butternut squash and apple soup with cinnamon croutons and crème fraiche drizzle.

Trzcinski, a chef of over 30 years who was trained at Johnson & Wales University, can make five-star anything the customer wants and those choices include fresh herb mascarpone crostini, sliced steak with micro greens; roasted filet mignon with fresh thyme and red wine brown sauce; on the bone chicken scarpariello with garlic, cherry peppers, rosemary, balsamic brown sauce; Chicken Brianna (named after his daughter) - sauteed chicken breast with wild mushrooms, creamy sherry brown sauce and fontina cheese.

Kimberly McCoy, who along with her accountant husband owned two successful restaurant businesses with Trzcinski for several years — La Cucina in Milford and Antonio's in Fairfield — called him a "renaissance man," beyond being a fabulous chef.

McCoy said his new business is "like a performing art" and puts Trzcinski's creative streak to good use.

"He's a multi-talented guy," McCoy said. "He could put anything into play that he wanted to," she said. "I think it totally fits in because he's a lover of music and also has a love of the culinary arts."

Trzcinski and Grasso struck up a romance last year after a chance meeting. It turns out they attended Andrew Warde High School in Fairfield at the same time as teens but didn't know each other.

Trzcinski said he and Grasso spark new ideas in each other and, "That's what makes us a great team."

They came up with the idea during the pandemic while his teaching went online, keeping in mind that some people aren't ready to return to restaurants.

"It forced us to have creative thought," he said the pandemic. "I'm an entrepreneurial, spirited

guy."

Grasso didn't have any restaurant experience — but she's learning.

Grasso said she was "enamored with Danny," after seeing him perform and work with food because he has so much "passion" for what he does.

"He had that glow about him," Grasso said.

Grasso, who does her share of work, including cleaning the kitchen while he entertains, said he creates an "unforgettable" experience. Grasso had her love do a graduation party for one of her children.

"He makes everything seem effortless...it takes away all the stress and you can enjoy yourself," Grasso said.

Trzcinski said Grasso is his "ideal customer," type because "she wants to entertain, but she's busy and doesn't want to do the prep work."

The catch sentence on his website states: "Want to Entertain and be a guest at your own event?"

Trzcinski, also known as "The Singing Chef," and formerly a culinary instructor at East Haven High School, plans with the customers, does the shopping, brings the groceries in, preps, cooks and cleans up afterwards — sometimes leaving a kitchen cleaner than when they got there, he quips.

He has played acoustic guitar since he was a kid and also plays harmonica.

Trzcinski performs mainly soft rock cover songs from the decades of the 1950s through the 1980s.

He plays during dinner and wherever else he can fit in — sometimes also during appetizers too before completing the main course.

He does covers of performers such as Creedence Clearwater Revival, Ed Sheeran, James Taylor, Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Gordon Lightfoot, John Prine and many more.

"I read the crowd," he said of choosing which decades to play. "This comes natural to me — food and hospitality."

## COMMUTE

From page A1

Board Executive Director Richard Sparaco said that the panel suspended its acceptance of commutation applications in 2020 while it reviewed policies and procedures. The board had reviewed only one application in 2019, records show.

According to state data, after accepting 37, 85 and 101 commutation applications in 2016, 2017 and 2018, respectively — five of which were granted — the board accepted one in 2019, none in 2020 and none so far this year.

Taubes contends that meant people in prison were inappropriately being denied the chance to even lobby the board.

"The board has the power under the law, under its discretion, to commute everyone's sentence," said Taubes. "Not only do they not use that power, they don't even have a process to submit applications."

Without the outlet of the board, Taubes said those in prison needed the approval of prosecutors to seek a sentence reduction or to get a judge to approve a motion for compassionate release.

But those are high bars, he said — prosecutors are not always inclined to support sentence reductions, and, in Connecticut, a person needs to be "physically or mentally debilitated, incapacitated or infirm as to be physically incapable of presenting a danger to society," as described by the board, to be granted compassionate release.

Taubes said he had worked with clients who had been in prison for decades without disciplinary issues. They and others "deserve a second chance, deserve a second look at their lives," he said.

"They're not being heard," said Taubes. "They have nowhere to go."

### A review

Sparaco said in an email that the board had "temporarily interrupted the acceptance of applications for commutations while we focused on the creation and implementation of a completely automated web based application processing system for Absolute Pardons and Certificates of Employability," which began in early 2020.

Then, during the pandemic, "the Board had to refocus its entire operation and shift to a virtual environment," which caused further delay, he said.

"We did this without interrupting the parole and pardons hearings process. However, during this time we had to completely place our commutation review on hold as we focused on our other statutory releases. Over the past months, we began to shift focus back to the commutation process," said Sparaco.

"Our review has resulted in the broadening of the eligibility criteria for commutations and (the) creation (of) a new application process," Sparaco said. "As we near the end of our review, we are looking forward to once again accepting applications with a current anticipated date of July 1, 2021."

Sparaco declined to discuss immediately the details of how the eligibility criteria had been changed, saying that it was still in draft form. The changes should be finalized within the month, he said.

The board reviewed 1,426 parole applications and 1,396 pardon applications in total in 2020, according to state statistics, down slightly from 1,703 and 1,592, respectively, in 2019.

The board also considers whether to pardon people, which erases a criminal record or affirms job eligibility; commutations are issued to people serving ongoing sentences.

Over that two-year period, the board granted 1,585 pardons — 593 in 2019, 992 in 2020 — and released 1,709 people on parole, 848 in 2019 and 861 in 2020, state data shows.

As of Friday, the board's website noted it is "in the process of revising the application and policy" governing commutations.

Taubes said he thinks the administration of Gov. Ned Lamont's administration had not made it a priority. Taubes said that governors in other states have the power to grant commutations.

Max Reiss, a spokesman for the Lamont administration, noted the governor does not have the power to grant commutations or intervene in individual cases. The governor supports the board resuming hearing commutation applications later this year, he said.

### Guidelines

Mike Lawlor, associate professor of criminal justice at the University of New Haven and former state lawmaker and prosecutor, said the standard for granting commutations had been unclear to date. Taubes noted this as well, saying it was the important for the board to establish clear guidelines.

Under the state constitution, the victims of the crime in question have to have input, but beyond that, it's a judgment call by the board, Lawlor said.

The primary population that could garner a commutation, he said is are those who committed isolated violent crimes while young, then were sentenced to decades or life in prison without parole.

He raised the examples of Penny Krom, a Danbury woman who was granted clemency in 2016 after drowning her newborn child, and Clyde Meikle, who had his sentence reduced by a judge after killing his cousin in 1994. Both had been model prisoners, he said.

"It's just a question of: do all these people need to be locked up forever?" Lawlor said.

Lawlor said he believed commutations would become more common in the future, as the board, and society in general, revisits some of the harsh sentences of the 1990s.

Decades prior, Lawlor said, people convicted of murder had been eligible for parole, before standards for punishment became more aggressive.

"The whole idea of commutation of sentence ... is something that only happened very occasionally in the past, but in recent years, there's been more of a focus on that," said Lawlor. "I think you're going to see more of these in the future."

Taubes described the plan to resume accepting applications as "extremely good news," saying it was "better late than never."

He said he hoped the board would make applications available before July 1, so those who would like to seek a commutation can work on their filings before the process formally resumes.

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