

# SunSentinel LOCAL & STATE

## Multiple charges dropped against teacher



By Shira Moolten  
South Florida Sun Sentinel

The Palm Beach County State Attorney's Office dropped charges in two of the three cases against a schoolteacher who was arrested three times in a week in November, court records show, though prosecutors plan to re-file some of them.

Hawazin Wright, 43, still faces a misdemeanor weapons charge after police say he brought an Arabian butcher knife to a pro-Palestine rally, and prosecutors intend to re-file a drug charge of possession of meth next week.

But Wright no longer faces felony charges of aggravated assault, written threats to kill, and obscene or harassing phone communications that stemmed from two separate arrests: one in which police say he assaulted a man on Clematis Street in West Palm Beach, and another, days later, in which they say he sent threatening texts to a woman he was dating.

In court filings, prosecutors wrote that the victim in the first case "failed to cooperate" and they lacked sufficient evidence in the second.

Wright, a Palm Beach Gardens resident, began working as a middle school English teacher at Christa McAuliffe Middle School in Boynton Beach in 2017, according to school records. He was on administrative leave as of late November.

Police first arrested Wright on Nov. 19 in the middle of a pro-Palestine rally in downtown West Palm Beach, according to a probable cause affidavit, after he walked into Okeechobee Boulevard, impeding traffic and screaming and waving at protestors.

When West Palm Beach police

officers told him to get out of the road, he ignored them, then tried to run away, and the officers tackled him. When they searched him, they discovered the 10-inch scimitar knife.

On Nov. 22, three days after the arrest, a judge granted a temporary risk protection order requiring that Wright surrender all firearms because he "poses a significant danger of causing personal injury to himself/herself or others in the near future." The judge later extended the order until Decem-

**Turn to Teacher, Page 4**

## Snow fun in Lake Worth



Lucas Valentin, 5, throws a snowball in Lake Worth on Wednesday. About 100 underserved kids from SOS Children's Village, Propel, Place of Hope and AACYP participated in the event made possible by Boca West Children's Foundation. **AMY BETH BENNETT/SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL**

## Child playing with lighter source of fire: official

By Shira Moolten  
and Angie DiMichele  
South Florida Sun Sentinel

The fire at Miami Dolphins' star Tyreek Hill's home in Southwest Ranches on Wednesday was caused by a child playing with a lighter, officials said Thursday.

The fire began in the bedroom, where the child was playing, according to Davie Fire Marshal Bob Taylor, and was ruled accidental. Family members were home at the time, but no one was injured.

A woman who was inside called 911 to report the growing fire was on the second floor of the home. A ringing alarm could be heard in the background.

"Can you help us? A fire is in the house!" she said.

"I don't know what to do. I need help," she said when the 911 operator asked her what happened. She asked if she should douse it with water, but the dispatcher told her to get everyone outside to safety.

She could be heard shouting in the background of the phone call, "There's a fire! There's a fire!"

Everyone had gotten outside safely, the caller told the operator. "Is it big?" someone asked in the background.

"Yes, it's getting bigger and bigger," the woman said.

Neither Taylor nor a Dolphins spokesperson could say Thursday whether the child was Hill's or related to Hill. Hill's agent, Drew Rosenhaus, did not respond to a phone call Thursday afternoon.

Davie Fire Rescue, Broward Sheriff's Fire Rescue and Southwest Ranches crews responded to the fire about 2 p.m. Wednesday. The fire did not spread beyond the one room, Taylor said, but there will be other damage from smoke and water.

Four people were at home at the time and evacuated.

Hill, who was at practice at the time of the fire, left early after he was informed of the incident, a Dolphins spokesperson told reporters Wednesday afternoon. Hill was not at practice Thursday.

Footage from several TV news outlets showed plumes of smoke billowing from one side

**Turn to Fire, Page 4**

## Palatka Republican renews effort to lower age to buy rifles and shotguns, reversing restriction enacted after Parkland

By Jim Saunders  
News Service of Florida

TALLAHASSEE — A House Republican on Thursday renewed an attempt to lower the minimum age from 21 to 18 for people to buy rifles and other long guns in Florida, potentially reversing part of a law that passed in the aftermath of the 2018 mass shooting at Parkland's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

Rep. Bobby Payne, R-Palatka, filed the proposal (HB 1223) for consideration during the 2024 legislative session, which will start Tuesday.

The House passed a virtually identical bill during the 2023 session, but the Senate did not take up the issue.

The Legislature and then-Gov. Rick Scott in 2018 approved a law that included increasing the minimum age to 21 after Nikolas Cruz, then 19, killed 17 students and faculty members at Marjory Stoneman Douglas. Cruz, who has been sentenced to life in prison in the murders, used a semi-automatic rifle to carry out the attack.

Federal law already prevented people under 21 from buying handguns.

The state law drew a legal challenge from the National Rifle Association, which contends that it violates Second Amendment rights. A federal district judge upheld the age restriction, but the case remains pending at the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. The attempt during the 2023

session to reverse the law was backed by House Speaker Paul Renner, R-Palm Coast. In a March statement, Renner described the proposal as the House "restoring the ability of young adults to exercise their Second Amendment rights."

Before the House voted 69-36 to pass the bill in April, Payne said it "corrects the wrong we did in 2018." He argued that the measure would leave intact other parts of the 2018 law that addressed mental health and school safety.

"You see the gun as the problem," Payne said during a debate. "I see the interventions and the policies as the answer."

But Democrats, such as Rep. Christine Hunschofsky, who was Parkland mayor at the time of

the Marjory Stoneman Douglas shooting, opposed lowering the minimum age. During a debate, Hunschofsky called the 2018 law a national "gold standard" for school safety.

"This law has stood the test of time because we have not had another school shooting in the state of Florida, and I hope to God we never do so that children will no longer hide, hit the ground, when a balloon pops. ... We are going down the wrong path here," she said.

The Senate did not take up the bill after President Kathleen Passidomo, R-Naples, said she did not support it. A Senate version of Payne's 2024 bill had not been filed as of early Thursday afternoon.

## Ladapo calls for halt on COVID vaccines, citing a theory discredited by many

By Caroline Catherman  
Orlando Sentinel

Escalating his controversial criticism of vaccine technology, Florida Surgeon General Joseph Ladapo has called for a halt in administering mRNA COVID-19 vaccines, based on a theory that has been refuted repeatedly by global regulatory agencies and health organizations.

In a statement issued on his state department website on Wednesday, Ladapo repeated claims he made last month, first reported in the South Florida Sun Sentinel, that DNA fragments used in the development of the COVID-19 mRNA vaccine could integrate into human DNA, causing a range of side effects including cancer. He alleged that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has not adequately assessed these risks.

"If the risks of DNA integration have not been assessed for mRNA COVID-19 vaccines, these vaccines are not appropriate for use in human beings," Ladapo said.

The problem with Ladapo's claim — and his new call for a halt in use — is that there's no evidence to suggest DNA integration is happening through the COVID-19 mRNA vaccines or even that it could happen.

"It's a theoretical possibility, but the chances of it happening are probably substantially less than of you winning the Powerball lottery two weekends in a row," said Thomas Unnasch, emeritus distinguished professor at the University of South Florida College of Public Health. "There's no evidence at all out there that this is actually happening, and there's no basis mechanically for it to be able to happen."

Over a billion shots have been administered worldwide, and there is no sign of the adverse effects, like increased cancer rates, that would be seen if the vaccines were somehow harming the human genome, said the director of the FDA's Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research, Dr. Peter Marks, in a letter to Ladapo after he first brought up these concerns

on Dec. 6.

The benefits of vaccines far outweigh the risks, Marks said, adding that the phenomenon Ladapo warned of is "implausible."

"We would like to make clear that based on a thorough assessment of the entire manufacturing process, FDA is confident in the quality, safety, and effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccines," Marks wrote in a Dec. 14 reply to Ladapo. "With over a billion doses of the mRNA vaccines administered, no safety concerns related to residual DNA have been identified."

Meanwhile, there is substantial evidence that vaccines protect against severe disease and death.

"The challenge we continue to face is the ongoing proliferation of misinformation and disinformation about these vaccines which results in vaccine hesitancy that lowers vaccine uptake," Marks said. "Given the dramatic reduction in the risk of death, hospitalization and seri-

**Turn to Vaccines, Page 4**

## State appeals court rejects minor's attempt to get abortion without consent

By Jim Saunders  
News Service of Florida

TALLAHASSEE — For the second time in less than three weeks, an appeals court Wednesday rejected a minor's attempt to have an abortion without notifying and getting consent from a parent or guardian.

But the ruling by a three-judge panel of the 1st District Court of Appeal could have broader implications for future requests by minors to receive waivers from a parental notification and consent requirement in state law.

The minor, identified by the pseudonym Jane Doe, went to the appeals court after Leon County Circuit Judge Neff turned down her request for such a waiver. In what appears to be a first-of-its-kind ruling in Florida, the appeals court Wednesday said it did not have legal jurisdiction to decide the case and dismissed it.

The appeals court said the case lacked a necessary "justiciable controversy" because it did not

have an "adverse party." Such an adverse party could have been a parent or guardian of the minor.

"This appeal comes to us with only the minor's interests presented to the court," said the ruling, written by Judge Lori Rowe and joined by Judges Thomas Winokur and Brad Thomas.

"And without representation of the interests of the parents — the parties whose rights are directly implicated under the parental notification and consent law. Indeed, the appeal comes to us with no appellee (a respondent in an appellate case) at all. Under these circumstances, there is no justiciable controversy for us to adjudicate."

While he agreed with the ruling, Thomas wrote a concurring opinion that indicated he thinks parents' rights are being violated.

"Without notice and without an opportunity to be heard, the

**Turn to Abortion, Page 4**