Schedules: White House and Congress

WHITE HOUSE:

- Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris will meet at 2 p.m. with the White House Covid-19 response team to discuss the omicron variant.
- White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki will hold a briefing at 2:30 p.m.

CONGRESS:

- The Senate meets at 10 a.m., with plans to vote on Biden’s pick for Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.
- The House isn’t in session and there are no hearings planned.

Congressional, Health Policy, and Political News

- Stat: Drug Makers Ring In The New Year With 5% Price Hikes: As 2022 gets under way, pharmaceutical companies have so far raised wholesale prices by a median of 4.9% on more than 450 prescription medicines, an overall annual increase that is comparable to the price hikes seen over the past three years, according to a new analysis. The numbers are preliminary, though, because still more price increases are expected to be disclosed by drug makers later this month, since not every company has reported their latest prices to industry databases. Nonetheless, the early indication is that many drug makers are keeping price hikes in check due to ongoing bad publicity that has sparked sustained political pressure.

- Modern Healthcare: CMS Officially Tosses 'Most-Favored Nation' Drug Pay Model: The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services officially tossed out a Trump-era policy that would have prevented Medicare from paying more for certain outpatient drugs than the lowest price paid by other wealthy countries, according to a final rule released last week. All but one of the 34 commenters on the proposed rule supported rescinding the policy, according to CMS. "We will continue to carefully consider this commenter's feedback and other stakeholders' feedback that we received as we explore all options to incorporate value into payments for Medicare Part B drugs, improve beneficiaries' access to evidence-based care, and reduce drug spending for consumers and throughout the healthcare system," the final rule said.

- Modern Healthcare: U.S. Saw Significant Drop In Telehealth Use During 2021: Telehealth utilization declined by an average of 40.3% a month last year compared to 2020, an analysis published last month shows. Telemedicine skyrocketed in popularity during the COVID-19
pandemic’s peaks starting in 2020, but patient declined as people returned to physician offices last year, according a review of commercial, Medicare Advantage and Medicaid managed care claims by the analytics firm Trilliant Health. The company compared telehealth utilization during the March through December 2020 period to 2021 to determine the trends.

- Bloomberg Government: $1 Trillion Windfall Jolts Federal Agencies: With the passage of the infrastructure package, Biden is asking the U.S. government to set up a suite of new programs, spend more on infrastructure, and hire enough workers to do it all — quick. To get there, the Department of Transportation and other federal agencies must find swift and accurate ways to get billions out the door — far more money than they’re used to having on hand. And the White House will need to stand up a team that will shepherd it all, plus work with the localities that operate infrastructure nationwide.

- Reuters: Virus Leaves Antibodies That May Attack Healthy Tissues: Months after recovering from SARS-CoV-2 infection, survivors have elevated levels of antibodies that can mistakenly attack their own organs and tissues, even if they had not been severely ill, according to new findings. Among 177 healthcare workers who had recovered from confirmed coronavirus infections contracted before the availability of vaccines, all had persistent autoantibodies, including ones that can cause chronic inflammation and injury of the joints, skin and nervous system.

- Stat: FDA Authorizes First Covid-19 Booster Shot For Teens Aged 12 To 15: The Food and Drug Administration on Monday extended the emergency use authorization for the Pfizer and BioNTech Covid-19 booster shot to include teens aged 12 to 15, paving the way for them to be eligible for the jabs later this week. It is the first booster shot to be authorized for this age group. A panel of independent experts that advises the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on vaccination policy will meet Wednesday to discuss the policy change. It’s possible the ACIP will issue what's known as a permissive recommendation — saying youths aged 12 to 15 may get a booster if they wish, but stopping short of urging them to do so.

- The Wall Street Journal: The Elizabeth Holmes Verdict: Theranos Founder Is Guilty On Four Of 11 Charges In Fraud Trial: A federal jury convicted Elizabeth Holmes, the startup founder who claimed to revolutionize blood testing, on four of 11 charges that she conducted a yearslong fraud scheme against investors while running Theranos Inc., which ended up as one of Silicon Valley’s most notorious implosions. The verdict caps a steep fall for the former Silicon Valley star who once graced magazine covers with headlines such as “This CEO is Out for Blood” and emulated Apple Inc. co-founder Steve Jobs by wearing black turtlenecks.

- Bloomberg Government: Capitol Has ‘Explosive’ Covid-19 Cases: The U.S. Capitol has seen an “explosive” growth of coronavirus infections, with more than 13% of those tested turning up positive over a seven-day period, up from from less than 1%, the chief doctor for Congress told lawmakers and staff yesterday. Attending Physician Brian P. Monahan said in a letter to member offices obtained by Bloomberg News that hundreds people have been infected and he urged maximum use of teleworking and better masking.
  o “The daily case rates will increase even more substantially in the coming weeks,” Monahan wrote, urging greater precautions. “Blue surgical masks, cloth face masks and gaiter masks must be replaced by the more protective KN95 or N95 masks.”