

COVID-19...from Page 1A

process of contacting students and instructors who attended classes March 8-14 "to inform them of the positive COVID-19 test result for the dance attendee (who was not a student)."

Responding to the likelihood of community spread last week, the municipalities of Murphy and Andrews in Cherokee County, North Carolina, imposed curfews with misdemeanor fines or imprisonment for would-be offenders, foreshadowing a new – hopefully temporary – normal.

In a better turn of events, the Towns County Elementary School teacher transported to Gainesville on March 15 with a suspected case of the virus tested negative, though the situation remains as serious as ever in the region and abroad.

Unlike any other moment in recent memory save for 9/11, people are witnessing a social, political and economic transformation of countries across the planet, with all signs pointing to still more sweeping changes to come as the novel coronavirus continues to spread.

In an unprecedented coordinated response, here in the U.S., local, state and federal governments nationwide have been in constant contact to implement a regular series of measures designed to combat the enemy at the gates: the highly contagious COVID-19.

This virus has proven to be particularly dangerous to the elderly and people with underlying health conditions, as it causes potentially deadly respiratory problems like pneumonia for vulnerable populations, though most virus victims appear to exhibit only mild symptoms before recovering.

Already, there's a candidate vaccine in trials, and President Donald Trump expressed his optimism recently over the repurposing of an anti-malarial drug as a treatment for the disease. Other potential treatments are in the works, with further testing required for all options.

Prevention, of course, is the best protection, which is why the following public health mantras should be familiar to all by now, especially after last week, when the president and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention unveiled the "15 Days to Slow the Virus" campaign to hamper human-to-human transmission:

Work and do school from home. Wash hands frequently. Avoid touching faces. Sneeze or cough into a tissue or elbow crook. Disinfect regularly used items and surfaces. Stay home when sick. Steer clear of gatherings of 10 or more people. Don't shake hands. Maintain at least 6 feet between people, etc.

"Even if you are young or otherwise healthy, you are at risk and your activities can increase the risk for others," the White House said in its messaging. "It is critical that you do your part to slow the spread of the coronavirus."

The numbers of positive COVID-19 diagnoses are increasing as expected, and this is very likely a good thing for the time being, serving as a real indicator that testing is becoming more available around the country during the pandemic.

And many health care officials believe the U.S. is making gains in its efforts to flatten the curve of infection, which will ultimately be achieved if the country is able to distribute the number of positive cases more evenly over time.

There remains a question, however, of whether or not the

most advanced health care system in the world is prepared for widespread illness requiring hospitalization, even with a flattened curve.

As COVID-19 cases continue to rise, it's possible that many hospitals will struggle to meet the demand of patients needing intensive care, i.e. the use of hospital beds and ventilators, though stakeholders at all levels are planning around the clock to address any potential issues there.

This is one of the reasons several states, like California and New York, have instituted shelter-in-place orders requiring "nonessential" businesses such as restaurants, bars and entertainment establishments to close, and for people to stay in their homes unless going out for supplies or medical reasons, all with an eye toward slowing the virus' spread.

First responders and businesses performing other "essential" services, like convenience stores, pharmacies and grocery stores, are being allowed to carry out their work under such orders.

It is conceivable that Georgia could implement a similar measure at the state level. In fact, Gov. Brian Kemp held a COVID-19 news conference after press time Monday, and there was speculation beforehand that he may call for greater restrictions on public gatherings and businesses.

Even the president could attempt to issue an order telling people to stay home, though he said recently he didn't think that was necessary. But that, too, could change in time, as so much has already.

To address current supply shortages of vital medical gear and equipment, much of which China has historically produced for the U.S. yet had been prioritizing for use by its own hard-hit population until recently, President Trump invoked last week the Defense Production Act of 1950.

This act allows the federal government to direct private industry to produce supplies deemed necessary for a national emergency response. Face masks and other medical supplies, including ventilators, could be made in this way for distribution among the various states.

As far as keeping communities up to speed on the virus, the Georgia Department of Public Health is now updating its COVID-19 Daily Status Report twice each day, at noon and 7 p.m.

The report contains the most current numbers of virus cases and deaths in Georgia, as well as a county-by-county breakdown of positive cases and how many tests are being conducted in the state. This report can be found at <https://dph.georgia.gov/covid-19-daily-status-report>.

Union County had been spared the news of a local case of the virus by press time, though that is likely to change any day now – and could have by the time people are reading this. That's how quickly developments are coming to the American public, as the 24/7 news cycle continues to breach its televised confines to take over the realities of everyday citizens' lives.

In-house testing is not currently available in Union County, though Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett of Union General Health Systems said the hospital has been collecting samples for weeks to send for testing by commercial labs and the Department of Public Health.

All locally collected samples – the number of which

was not immediately available – had come back negative by press time, meaning people testing negative but presenting with novel coronavirus symptoms had actually contracted some other circulating illness.

Due to a limited supply of collection kits, the only people currently being tested are symptomatic individuals who have either been to an affected area or had contact with an infected person/someone suspected of having COVID-19, according to District 2 Public Health.

Healthy people do not need to be tested. A doctor will determine if a patient meets the testing criteria, so people should call their doctors if they suspect they may have contracted the virus.

The Department of Public Health has established a drive-up collection site in Hall County to take test samples from residents who meet the criteria.

Test results are currently taking a few days to a week to come back, and regardless of whether or not sick people have this particular disease, they are being asked to self-quarantine and recover at home unless ill enough to require hospitalization.

A federally established public/private partnership will allow for commercial labs to coordinate with big box stores for space to enable drive-through sample collections, which should increase the rate of testing soon, thereby giving the public a better idea of overall infection rates.

The tests should be covered by insurance, and individuals without insurance who cannot afford one will be able to get tested for free, according to the Department of Public Health.

Union General Health continues to plan for the possibility of a large-scale outbreak in the county, with contingencies in place to treat people outside of the hospital utilizing resources from the local Emergency Management Agency to expand its triage area.

"We've got a whole pandemic/flu plan that we would implement," Barnett said. "If we had widespread illness and we were overwhelmed with a surge of patients, the EMA would step in with their incident command and would help us with tents outside and that sort of thing. But we're not to that point."

Barnett is urging people with symptoms to also call 1-866-PUB-HLTH, or 866-782-4584, where they will be able to find additional testing resources should they meet the current requirements.

"If they are sick enough to need care, then we are happy to take care of them," Barnett said. "Otherwise, it's best just to take care of yourself at home, isolate at home, until your illness passes. It's recommended that you stay home and isolate yourself for at least 72 hours after your symptoms resolve."

For now, like other institutions, Union General has put its hospitals and nursing homes in Union and Towns counties on lockdown to the general public until further notice to keep the virus from spreading among patients and employees in those facilities.

And many other local procedures have been altered as a precaution over the virus, including the cessation of in-person visits at the Union County Jail and the closing of Blairsville City Hall offices to the public, though people can still make payments for city water, taxes, etc., by phone, mail and internet.

To keep essential services going, for instance, the Sheriff's Office is "responding to calls for service as normal" while limiting public access to Sheriff's Office buildings, and the Union County Government has closed the courthouse and public offices to people without an appointment.

"If people call, we'll answer, but unless it's a necessity, try to wait until all this is over," Sheriff Mack Mason said. "Since the Tag Office is handling so much over the phone and through the mail right now, we're going to be very lenient on tag violations for the time being."

Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris said county officials are having to constantly adapt in light of the extremely fluid situation. He remains in regular contact with EMA Director David Dyer for his many local and state connections, as well as the staff of neighboring and regional counties to see what decisions they are making.

"In the end, with all the advice I can accumulate – and collectively – we all are trying to do what is best for Union County and our residents," Paris said. "We can only trust that, with the help of God, we do what is best for all."

Residents can find an up-to-date list of procedural changes for the various county offices and other services at www.unioncountygva.gov, including the following:

The Commissioner's Office, Clerk of Superior Court, District Attorney, Geographic Information System, Magistrate Court, Probate Court, Public Defender, Registrar, Tax Assessor, Tax Commissioner, Licensing – Alcohol, Sheriff's Office;

Fire Department & EMA, Building & Inspection, Chamber of Commerce, City of Blairsville, Community Service, Probation Services, Senior Center, Transit System, Civic Center, UGA Extension/4-H, Food Pantry and USDA.

It should be noted that, by press time, the Union County Food Pantry was continuing to serve the community Monday through Thursday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., with questions being directed to 706-745-6596.

For his part, Dyer wants people to know that the county's first responders are continuing to take the threat of the virus seriously, and that extra precautions are in place to protect EMS workers and others from exposure during responses to medical calls, including call screenings by E-911 Dispatchers for people exhibiting symptoms.

In their ongoing planning and coordination efforts, Dyer and his EMA team are in continual conversations with multiple local and state governments, as well as other private and public organizations, including the Georgia Emergency Management Agency, the Department of Public Health, the hospitals, and many other EMAs from surrounding counties and areas.

"We're trying to put out the most accurate information as possible in an ever-changing situation," Dyer said. "And please understand that misinformation is rampant right now, be it rumors, social media or some other online outlet."

"People need to find trusted resources that are updated regularly, like the county website. Of course, we still recommend people follow all of the CDC's recommendations at CDC.gov."

Turning once again to examine the big picture, it looks like a lot of what could be happening next is millions of people across the U.S. having to stay home, which may help them avoid the virus and therefore limit its spread, but it won't protect people's jobs, businesses and incomes.

To combat this problem while simultaneously trying to shore up battered financial markets, the White House and Congress have worked in a bipartisan manner over the last week to forward a nearly \$2 trillion proposed stimulus package to provide broad economic support to businesses and individuals across the land.

The details of that package, including which households can expect what kind of benefit in their time of need, were still being worked out at press time.

In Georgia, the Department of Labor has revised its rules for unemployment, requiring employers "to file partial claims on behalf of their employees whenever it is necessary to temporarily reduce work hours or there is no work available for a short period."

This measure should provide at least some relief, as here, there and everywhere, local businesses are either

shutting their doors to the public and working over the phone and/or email; closing up shop all together; or reducing hours and adjusting services to protect customers, employees and the community from the novel coronavirus.

Affected businesses include local restaurants, some of which have voluntarily closed their dining areas to the public and are encouraging folks to order drive-through, takeout or delivery.

For a running list of restaurant changes in the wake of coronavirus, check out www.visitdowntownblairsville.com/eat, and for retail establishments, see www.visitdowntownblairsville.com/shop.

Some grocery stores have begun rationing certain items like milk, eggs, bread, fresh meat and chicken, toilet paper, paper towels, bleach, hand sanitizer, Clorox wipes, etc., which have been moved to a protected species list of sorts to limit the amount customers can purchase at a time.

These decisions are being made largely at the corporate level for now, where supply chains are being tightly controlled to prevent hoarding and empty shelves. The overarching message seems to be that everything is OK; the trucks will keep coming with supplies, so there's no need to panic-buy.

And that's certainly a message local officials want to broadcast as well: Don't panic – everyone is in this together, and everyone will pull through.

Still, in a time of unprecedented challenges that seem to be shaking all the societal foundations at once, many people are taking the time to make sure they are treating the situation with the appropriate level of concern.

Looking back on his 20 years in office, Commissioner Paris said that, as far as challenges go, responding to the COVID-19 pandemic "is at the top of the list."

"We are caught in the terrible position of negatively impacting business at a time when it is already hurting," Paris said of the current precautionary environment. "But at the same time, everyone is afraid to do too little not knowing the negative impact decisions will have for the public."

"At this point in time, it is best to overdo protections for the public while still trying to be reasonable."

Of course, it's impossible to gauge in the present moment the ultimate impact of all these voluntary and government-based responses, or to know what exactly a reasonable response might look like over the long term.

However, health experts are confident that, together, the measures will spread out the rate of infection over time,

thereby making it easier for American communities to care for their sick.

Thankfully, there's still plenty of positive news out there, including stories of community successes in the face of adversity, right here in Union County.

Though many working parents will have to continue caring for their children instead of going to their day jobs after Gov. Kemp closed all schools through at least March 31, the Union County School District has stayed busy providing thousands of meals to families whose children were used to getting much of their nutrition on campus.

Perhaps good news to many kids' ears, the Georgia Department of Education announced Friday that "educators, parents and students can expect that no state testing – to include Georgia Milestones, GAA 2.0, and GKIDS – will be administered in Georgia this school year."

And the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC has been coordinating with various community partners in its five-county service area to provide public Wi-Fi hotspots, making it easier for kids without readily available internet to do their online schoolwork outside the classroom.

Here in Union County, those public hotspots – available for telecommuting adults as well – are available at Meeks Park and in the Harmony Grove Baptist Church parking lot.

"In order to access the Wi-Fi service, simply look for the Wireless SSID named 'Student' and choose 'connect,'" the EMC said. "This service will work with laptops, tablets, cellphones and other Wi-Fi enabled devices."

Work continues on various county projects, including the Double Gym, Paw Park and a cover for the running chute over at the Saddle Club Arena, all of which will come in handy in the hopefully not-too-distant future, once the threat of COVID-19 passes.

In positive local business news, in addition to continuing to make products for its customers in numerous states, Granddaddy Mimm's Moonshine Distillery has entered into partnerships with two other Georgia companies to produce alcohol for much-needed hand sanitizer.

"The process is basically the same as producing alcohol for our moonshines," Granddaddy Mimm's owner Tommy Townsend said. "We're happy we can keep the distillery working in these hard times and provide a product whose end result can help people stay healthy."

Additional COVID-19 resources include coronavirus.gov, gov.georgia.gov, <https://www.fema.gov/coronavirus-rumor-control>, and coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html.