

# North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Legal Organ of Union County

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Wednesday, April 8, 2020

## Gov. Kemp orders all Georgians to 'shelter in place' Local ordinances suspended; state parks remain open

**By Shawn Jarrard**  
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Most of Georgia's 159 counties have confirmed cases of COVID-19, and it's just a matter of time before the entire map fills in. Regardless of confirmation, people should assume the deadly virus is here and spreading in the community.

To put things into perspective, the first known case of the virus was documented some 7,700 miles away on Nov. 17. Fast forward a mere five months, and COVID-19 has infected hundreds of thousands

of people in the U.S. alone, with cases in every state and territory.

That's why following the guidelines established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Georgia Department of Public Health is so important.

The highly contagious disease requires that everyone do their part by washing their hands, staying home, and wearing some form of facial covering like a mask, scarf or bandana when they go out in public, even when healthy, to avoid asymptomatic transmission.

Gov. Brian Kemp took another step forward last week to slow the spread of COVID-19 in Georgia, issuing a statewide shelter-in-place order that went into effect Friday, April 3, to last through Monday, April 13, unless extended.

So, how does the shelter-in-place order apply to individuals and families? For the duration of the order, all Georgians must follow what Kemp is calling the "Basic Rule."

The Basic Rule requires residents and visitors of the state to remain in their residences and take "every possible precaution

to limit social interaction to prevent the spread or infection of COVID-19."

There are four exceptions to the Basic Rule allowing travel as long as people are: engaging in "Essential Services"; working in "Critical Infrastructure"; conducting "Minimum Basic Operations" for businesses, organizations, etc.; and performing "Necessary Travel," or travel related to the other three Basic Rule exceptions.

"Essential Services" consist of things like supply runs for groceries, pharmaceuticals

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Gov. Brian Kemp during his April 1 televised announcement detailing his shelter-in-place order that took effect Friday.

## New Superior Court Judge Levins pledges 'open, fair courtroom'

**By Shawn Jarrard**  
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The Enotah Judicial Circuit's newest member, Judge Buck Levins, in a unique swearing-in ceremony at the Union County Courthouse on Tuesday, March 31.

Usually, the ceremony to swear in a new Superior Court judge occurs in the Capitol with the governor presiding. But due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to fill the busy circuit's vacant seat, the swearing-in took place locally last week instead of in Atlanta at a later date.

Superior Court Chief Judge Raymond George performed the ceremony, and Levins' wife, Jaime, held the Bible upon which the new judge swore in, as friends, local stakeholders and colleagues from the State Bar of Georgia looked on proudly.

There in spirit were the



New Superior Court Judge Buck Levins with his wife Jaime holding Chief Judge Raymond George's "Sword of Justice," which Levins signed during his swearing-in ceremony last week at the Union County Courthouse. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Levins' parents and family members, who wanted to be there but live in other areas, so could not attend due to concerns over travel and the coronavirus.

"This is a happy day in this courtroom," George said to those spread out around the room. "A lot of times, this courtroom sees the tragedy of

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## All active voters to receive absentee ballot applications in mail

**By Shawn Jarrard**  
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Attention all active Georgia voters: that "Application for Official Absentee Ballot" you received in the mail is not a scam - it's the real deal.

Last week, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Secretary of State's Office began mailing absentee ballots for the May 19 General Primary Election to every active voter in the state, to the tune of about 6.9 million voters.

Applications are prefilled with some information specific to individual voters, like their name and address, and voters will need to fill out the rest, affix postage and mail the pre-addressed form to receive an absentee ballot for the May 19 primary.

Instructions for filling out the form and mailing it are included with the application,



Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger

and people can also email it: "In lieu of mailing, you can scan or take a picture of your completed and signed application and email it to: ucregistrar@uniongov.com."

People should be on the lookout for a special drop box outside the Union County Courthouse as well, where applications and, later, absentee ballots will be accepted.

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## Blairsville churches explore new mediums to host services

**By Jarrett Whitener**  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Churches in the area are working diligently to keep in touch with their parishioners and the community during this time of pandemic.

That means churches are looking for new ways to connect with the community and keep everyone together when gathering at physical locations is not the best option.

"We are trying desperately to see what the needs are of not only the members but the community as a whole," said Executive Pastor Tony Neal of First Baptist Church. "We are also learning to utilize technology and train those that choose to worship together."

"It is an effort for the church to move in a direction to



Sigrid and Walt Hutton of House of Prayer Church preparing food pantry items for people in need during the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

where we involve our community. We are having to learn to do it ourselves, then teach them to do it. A lot of people don't use that kind of medium very often.

"We are hosting it online

so that we can be available to reply when people are watching, and we can interact with them if they want to reach out and talk to us. If someone has a need or

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## Residents share thoughts on virus, sheltering in place

**By Jarrett Whitener**  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Folks are becoming increasingly cautious of the COVID-19 virus, as well as the state's shelter-in-place order. As such, many people have been shopping for supplies and making sure they are stocked up on food and cleaning supplies.

"The stores have been pretty busy," said Anthony Mathews, who was in town from Gwinnett County last week. "I'm up here because I go around to help work on power for people and stuff like that."

"People are hearing about the shelter in place, and they are getting ready to ride it out with all the food they need. I have not hoarded any toilet paper or cleaning products, but I have done my fair share of shopping



Many residents braved the pandemic last week to get their caffeine fix at Cabin Coffee in Downtown Blairsville last week, with streets remaining busy before the shelter-in-place order. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

lately.

"I used to go out to eat a lot. I still do a little on the job. Now, the wife and I sit at home a little more often, and we have

the time to cook. She's been trying all these new recipes and really learning how to do things. I think that might be

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## Substance abuse, mental health services still going strong

**By Todd Forrest**  
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The novel coronavirus continues to impact every aspect of society, putting additional barriers in the way of much-needed services throughout many communities.

Take health care professionals on the front lines of the opioid crisis and other substance abuse issues, who are now facing new challenges in the ongoing battle to save lives and rebuild families.

Local treatment facilities like New Hope Counseling and MedMark have undergone changes in the wake of the pandemic, but they want to make the public aware that they remain open for business and will lend a hand to those in need.

As if the situation wasn't serious enough, the director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse expressed concerns recently that the uncertainty and financial hardships surrounding the coronavirus could lead to a nationwide increase in drug and alcohol use.

"Every one of us is affected by COVID - maybe we don't get infected, (but) we're all anxious because of the uncertainties," Institute Director Dr. Nora Volkow told U.S. News and World Report. "How we cope with that anxiety is very much dependent on multiple factors, including our circumstances, but one of the ways that people cope with it is by taking drugs."

Locally, New Hope Counseling has closed its physical offices but continues

holding group sessions online. According to Treatment Coordinator Shanna Prather, online intake evaluations should begin April 15.

In the meantime, other resources are available to those stuck at home with fears of getting left to their own devices.

Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous have moved their meetings online via Zoom, and online group sessions are available 24 hours a day at www.intherooms.com, Prather said.

The Georgia CARES Warm Line features a peer support line that any Peach State resident can call or text if they find themselves in a substance abuse crisis. A specialist is available 365 days a year from 8:30 a.m. until 11

p.m. at 844-326-5400. More information is available at gasubstanceabuse.org.

In addition to these resources, anyone in a mental health crisis can call the Georgia Crisis Line 24 hours a day at 1-800-715-4225. Further details are obtainable at the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Development Disabilities website at dbhdd.georgia.gov.

Along with New Hope, Blairsville's MedMark Treatment Center is an opiate addiction treatment clinic offering methadone maintenance and counseling services.

At the moment, for reasons beyond its control, MedMark is unable to accept new patients in Blairsville, but director Joy Atkins suggested

an alternative MedMark clinic in Murphy, North Carolina.

Atkins also assured the clinic's patients and the community that they will remain open during the mandatory shelter-in-place order, so there's no reason to worry that hundreds of people within Towns and Union counties will suddenly find themselves thrown into extreme opiate withdrawals.

"I have received emails (from the state informing us) that we are not allowed to close," Atkins said. "Nobody should have any concerns about (MedMark) closing and stopping its services. Besides, that would be evil to do to our patients."

MedMark of Blairsville

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By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News Editor

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