

North Georgia News

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Coronavirus testing site now up and running in Young Harris

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

YOUNG HARRIS – With COVID-19 numbers steadily rising, residents can take comfort in the fact that the state's brand-new local collection site for coronavirus testing is up and running, effective April 24.

The mobile collection site is being hosted at the Towns County Health Department, located at 1104 Jack Dayton Circle, and is serving residents of Towns and Union counties. According to Dave Palmer of District 2 Public Health, the Towns County Health Department parking lot will house the "drive-up" site, with samples being collected by employees of both the Towns and Union health departments.

"It's more of a drive-up site than it is a drive-thru," he

said. "(Patients) will drive into the parking lot and (health care workers) will come out to the car and collect the specimen. There will be signs directing people where to go."

However, testing is unavailable to the general public, so people will need to get a referral from their local health department, health care professional or physician before a test will be administered.

"If it's determined a test is needed, the patient will be given a certain time to visit the Health Department and a person under investigation number," Palmer said. "When they get to the Health Department, the staff will ask for their number and collect the specimen."

Appointments for testing will be available Tuesdays and Fridays only from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. Patients will be notified of their results via telephone within 24-48 hours, which is a

significant improvement over previous wait times, Palmer said.

"When we first started testing, we had some long turnaround times," he said. "Some tests were taking several days to come back, sometimes up to a week, and in rare cases, over a week."

The procedure conducted at the site will provide the patient with a single positive or negative result for COVID-19. If the test issues a positive reading, the patient will be instructed to self-isolate.

"When we ask you to self-isolate in the home, that means to isolate away from family members," Palmer said. "Try to find one room with its own bathroom, and if they need to enter other parts of the house, try to maintain 6 feet of distance."

No antibody test is
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Health care professionals at the Towns County Health Department are testing Union and Towns residents with COVID-19 symptoms every Tuesday and Friday. Call the local health department or a physician for a referral. Photo by Todd Forrest

Masked man holds up Circle K in weekend armed robbery

By Shawn Jarrard
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The Blairsville Police Department is asking for the public's help in identifying a masked man who committed an armed robbery over the weekend.

Around 11:15 p.m. on Saturday, April 25, a white male about 6 feet in height entered the Circle K on the corner of Murphy Highway and Blue Ridge Street, Blairsville. Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter said.

The man waited for a customer to leave the store before approaching the counter, at which point he revealed a



Blairsville Police need help identifying this armed robber, seen here wearing brand-specific lettering on his shirt: "RVCA." Photo/Security Camera

County switching to 'CodeRED' mass alert system May 1

By Shawn Jarrard
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People need to know that the information they're presented with is reliable, especially in an emergency.

Enter the Union County Emergency Management Agency. Headed up by Director David Dyer, the local EMA is all about preparing for local disaster responses, and Dyer knows that in times of crisis, communication is key.

That's why the EMA has decided to switch from its current Wireless Emergency Notification System, or WENS, to the widely used "CodeRED"

mass alert system, which has several added benefits over the old system.

This switchover will begin on May 1, and for people already used to receiving WENS emergency alerts via text, email and/or phone call, the transition will be seamless.

"We'll be taking the WENS database and moving it into CodeRED," Dyer said. "If you've been getting alerts this whole time, you could just keep on getting alerts and will never know the difference."

Both systems will run simultaneously for a month or two to ensure CodeRED is running smoothly before shutting down WENS.

The county has used WENS with great success since 2010 to keep people notified of extreme weather events, boil water advisories and other messages of immediate

import.

And while it's certainly a good system, WENS is lacking in features compared to CodeRED, even though both services cost roughly the same at a little more than \$6,000 a year to maintain.

"We looked into changing over to a new program last year," Dyer said. "We finally got the timetable worked out this year, and we're going to a system called CodeRED."

CodeRED is feature rich and popular abroad, with many municipalities implementing it for emergency alerts, including neighboring Towns and White counties.

"The best thing about this that's different from the system that we have now is, it's got its own app," Dyer said. "You can get the CodeRED Mobile Alert app, and no matter where you
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Union County feeling more virus impacts as COVID-19 spreads

Nursing home resident tests positive; relatives contacted

By Shawn Jarrard
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Union Countians got hit with a one-two punch of COVID-19 last week after learning of the first positive case to crop up inside the Union County Nursing Home in an employee, followed shortly by the state's announcement of the county's second death to the novel coronavirus.

According to the Georgia Department of Public Health COVID-19 Daily Status Report for April 24, an 84-year-old woman with underlying health conditions became the second person from Union County to die from COVID-19.

The county recorded its first death on April 9, a 79-year-old male, also with underlying
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Georgia National Guard troops gearing up to clean the Union County Nursing Home on April 23. Photo by Todd Forrest

National Guard cleans Union, Towns health system facilities



Union County Nursing Home residents played bingo outdoors as Georgia National Guard troops cleaned the facility on April 23. Photo by Todd Forrest

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Local health officials have taken extra precautions in recent weeks, with both Union and Towns counties seeing a significant spike in the number of localized COVID-19 cases.

Union County jumped from 15 to 32 positive cases between Monday, April 20, and Sunday, April 26, with the nursing home experiencing its first confirmed case when an employee tested positive for the virus.

Meanwhile, Towns County increased from 13 cases to 20 confirmed cases over the same span and saw a nursing home resident testing positive for the disease.

Coinciding with last week's uptick in cases, infection control teams from the Georgia National Guard paid prescheduled visits to the Union County Nursing Home, Union General Hospital and

Chatuge Regional Hospital to cleanse and sanitize each facility. The National Guard disinfected Chatuge Nursing Home the previous week.

"The Georgia National Guard is doing an outstanding job with offering their services to provide cleaning and disinfecting of health care facilities (throughout the state)," said Julia Barnett, chief nursing officer, Union General Health. "So, we have chosen to be proactive and have them come and clean all of our facilities."

"As you know, COVID has touched all of our facilities, because it's just so widespread and there are cases everywhere. Usually, the (National Guard) is cleaning long-term care facilities, but since they were going to be in the area, they said they didn't mind doing our hospitals as well."

According to 1st Lieutenant Richard Hughes, 3rd Battalion public relations

officer, each health care facility may submit a request through the Georgia Department of Public Health, which will then contact the guard to send in a team.

"Our battalion has several infection control teams, but since our base is in Cumming, north-central and northeast Georgia has been our primary area of operation," Hughes said. "There are some areas of Georgia that have been hit harder, so we've been sent elsewhere whenever needed."

In addition to cleaning health care facilities, soldiers from the 3rd Battalion are preparing to battle COVID-19 by setting up mobile testing sites across the state.

"Right now, that seems to be our focus," Hughes said. "We will have a couple of medics on-site and run all of the samples through Augusta Medical Center. We'll soon be taking personnel from
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UCSO arrests three suspects, seizes \$24,400 in meth bust



Dale Raymond Queen

By Shawn Jarrard
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Despite the slowdown in crime from COVID-19, the Narcotics Division of the Union County Sheriff's Office remains vigilant in its efforts to



Barry Wayne Gerald

get drugs off the streets.

Narcotics investigators demonstrated this commitment most recently with their April 17 arrest of three suspects on meth trafficking charges.

"The Sheriff's Office executed a search warrant on the



Sarah Mae McCarty

properties and a camper owned by Dale Raymond Queen off of Page Little Road in Union County," UCSO Lt. Tyler Miller said. "The search warrant resulted from an investigation of methamphetamine
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