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new symptoms develop. All residents have had an initial baseline test.

Barnett reiterated that the nursing homes are following all testing guidelines, and that the family of each resident is alerted every time a new case crops up in one of the system's long-term care facilities.

All nursing home residents who have died with COVID-19 were elderly and/or had significant underlying health conditions, both of which are known to contribute to mortality risks with and without the viral disease.

Barnett said last week that recovering residents were doing well and that "most are still asymptomatic."

A majority of residents have remained well enough to stay in the nursing homes under observation per Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, Barnett said, with most experiencing mild or asymptomatic infections not requiring hospitalization.

The outbreak in Union County appears to have doubled over the last two weeks, with about 80 of the facility's 85 total positive tests being tied to the outbreak.

Roughly 2/3 of the nursing home population has tested positive for COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic,

though many of these residents have either fully recovered by now or experienced asymptomatic cases from the beginning.

Only one resident remained hospitalized at Union General Hospital at press time.

The Blairsville outbreak began around the beginning of August, when a new resident at the nursing home suddenly developed symptoms before quickly requiring hospitalization. Barnett said this same individual had tested negative twice before being admitted as a resident.

A second resident started exhibiting COVID symptoms soon after, prompting the nursing home to test everyone on that hall for the virus on Aug. 7. When 20 tests came

back positive Aug. 12, the hospital tested all residents and staff in the building, with ongoing testing resulting in the discovery of the newer cases.

Forty-two total Union County Nursing Home employees have tested positive since the start of the pandemic, many of them after the outbreak began. There are currently 13 asymptomatic employees who are not working due to their positive status and are quarantined at home.

Staff are screened each day at the beginning of their shift for temperature and symptoms prior to beginning work, and Barnett continues to emphasize the impossibility of knowing exactly how the virus entered the building.

The chief nursing officer commends the staff members at

the nursing homes, saying that everyone remains vigilant in working to keep residents safe in such uncertain times, and that both facilities remain on lockdown to outside visitors, as they have since mid-March.

Viral outbreaks are fairly common in nursing homes, with influenza and stomach bugs regularly affecting large percentages of long-term care residents nationwide, including in the past in Union and Towns.

Through the end of August, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services had linked 53,196 deaths to COVID-19 in nursing home facilities, at the time making up at least 30% of all COVID-related deaths in the U.S.

Grubbs...from Page 1A



Grubbs fed firefighters and E-911 dispatchers delicious barbecue plates over the weekend. Station 1 firefighters pictured here with Grubbs, L-R: Jake Mathis, Austin Denton, Grubbs, Jason Turner, Jonathan Fortenberry and Will Barton. Photo/Submitted

days, with all this chaos and stuff going on, it is just a good thing to do.

"I call it 'Community Unity.' Help somebody out and show them what they mean, what comes around goes around. I appreciate everything that these guys do, and my pockets ain't that deep, but my heart is, and if I can feed 50 or 60 firemen that are trying to protect us, then that is what I am going to do."

And Grubbs appreciates the involvement of local businesses that showed their support of the firefighters also by helping him put the meal together.

"We got them some pulled pork sandwiches, and we have to be sure to give Ingles and Foodland a shout out, because Foodland gave me the slaw, and Ingles donated a lot of the other stuff," Grubbs said. "And Jim Brown with Edward Jones, he helped offset some of my costs. I really appreciate it."

Firefighter Jacob Mathis enjoyed the meal at Fire Station 1, and he said Saturday that he was grateful for the support of people like Grubbs in the

community.

"I think it is nice to get something personal like food," said Mathis, who volunteers with Fire Station 4 and works full-time at Station 1. "When you get donations, that is cool, but when it is something personal that they really put work into like their craft – for him it was barbecue – it is nice."

"When someone takes their hobby and does their hobby for us, it really shows the kindness in a person."

With COVID-19 and various other conflicts creating tension this year, Mathis and his fellow firefighters have been working hard to push through the negativity and do the best they can to serve the community.

"The COVID stuff has been going on for so long that it is putting a damper on everybody," Mathis said. "It is a little bit of a bummer, and everybody is locked in their house or scared to go out, and it has been a tough year."

"I guess just pushing forward and trying to make things better and trying to do the best we can and being kind

to each other is the biggest thing."

The event was such a success that Grubbs hopes he can be more involved with serving the community in the future by feeding other first responders.

"Maybe I will move up to sheriff or hospital down the road," Grubbs said. "We are doing this one step at a time, and I just love doing it. I live for this stuff. I think it is important to be part of the community and show them that we appreciate them."

As a reminder, Union Countians can support one of their own by tuning into Netflix Sept. 18 to watch Grubbs compete in the debut season of an original cooking contest called "The American Barbecue Showdown."

"Eight of the country's best backyard smokers and pitmasters vie for the title of American Barbecue Champion in a fierce but friendly faceoff," according to Netflix.com.

Barbecue masters Melissa Cookston and Kevin Bludso will be judging the contest alongside hosts Lyric Lewis and Rutledge Wood.

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were able to choose your first duty station, and so we chose San Diego, California."

She spent about 5 years on active duty in the Navy before getting out to start a family. Upon deciding to return, she was told the Navy was not accepting nurses with a diploma only, "so I got into the Army because they would accept me."

Jackson then earned her undergraduate degree at the University of Florida while enlisted in the Army.

McCann is the nurse on the COVID Team, which oversees monitoring students sent home to quarantine and students calling with symptoms or exposures, and she does contact tracing for the schools.

Her extensive experience comes from years of traveling and holding different positions in military and government nursing throughout her career. She is the wife of High School Administrative Assistant Art McCann, who is himself an Army Ranger recently inducted into the Ranger Hall of Fame.

"I am married to Art McCann for 36 years this year, and we are military – he did almost 28 years in the service," McCann said. "After we were married, I went to nursing school at North Georgia College."

"We knew that we were going to come back here when we retired, but we went to Hawaii, Washington, Texas and Italy. Those were the duty stations that we have done since living here, and I was a nurse in Hawaii just in the local hospital."

"Then, when we got to Washington, I worked at Madigan (Army Medical Center) for a couple of years. From there, we went to Texas, where I worked at a civilian hospital, and I have been in labor and delivery since Hawaii."

"I have been a nurse for 25 and a half years and have done

labor and delivery for around 23 years of that. When we went to Italy, I substituted as a nurse in the Department of Defense, and then I helped with standards of practice for the military to open the first birthing center in the military's history, Army, and I helped open that in Italy."

"From there I went to Fort Bragg and worked at Womack (Army Medical Center), which I think is the largest military hospital and largest birthing one."

With all their combined experience, and with COVID moving through the community, Jackson and McCann were happy to answer the call put out by Union County Schools for more nursing assistance.

"I have always wanted to be active in the community, so when I had the opportunity to use my nursing skills and come out of retirement, so to speak, I jumped at the chance," Jackson said. "I volunteer at Healing Hands, the community clinic, and Project Hope at the church giving out food."

"I have always been of the mindset of being active and involved, but when I can use my nursing skills like at Healing Hands and the school system, I just jumped at the chance to be able to participate."

By working through the schools, the nurses can do their part in the prevention of COVID-19 while serving the community they have come to know and love.

"When you are in the military, volunteering is just another part of your life," McCann said. "Even though we have been here almost 11 years, I worked a lot, and now not working, I didn't want to go back into a hospital setting because I didn't want to bring it home to my house."

"So, this was a great opportunity in my eyes to give back, because I felt guilty not

working during COVID as a nurse. This way I can help. We have four children and four grandchildren, and my husband works at the school, and he is a part of it, so it just felt right."

McCann and Jackson's help this school year is much appreciated, said School Head Nurse Leigh Ann Hartley, noting that everyone has been working together to limit the spread of the virus in the schools by keeping students with symptoms separated.

"This has been more challenging because we see a lot of students on a regular basis," Hartley said. "We have five full-time nurses; we are fortunate enough to have a nurse in each school."

"On an average day, I am at the Primary School, and the younger students come to see the nurse more often, but I would say we see 40 to 60 kids a day on average. With COVID, what we have tried to do is limit the visits to the nurse's office, because we don't want to expose our well children to the sick children."

"All of the clinics have gotten a makeover so that we can socially distance. Kids that just are coming for medication, if they are well, are kept separate from children with any symptoms. We have brought on three new substitute nurses and have been using them regularly. We are really just trying to keep the schools open."

The nurses at the school system wish to compliment the community for the leveling off in COVID numbers in recent weeks and the followed precautions when it comes to the virus.

People can keep an eye on COVID in the schools by monitoring the Union County Schools Facebook page, where updates for COVID-19 among staff and students are posted on a weekly basis.