

# OPENING W

The Warriors opened the Region 3D tournament with a victory » **SPORTS**



# PARADE

The success of actor Harrison Ford » **INSIDE**

# MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

THE VOICE OF THE COMMUNITY FOR 130 YEARS

Sunday, February 23, 2020 • MARTINSVILLEBULLETIN.COM • Martinsville, Virginia \$2

## Woman ID'd suspect while lying on porch

Court records say that while she lay mortally wounded on porch of a house in Fieldale Krystal Anne McReynolds told a Henry County Sheriff's deputy that Christopher McDowell had shot her.

By Bill Wyatt  
bill.wyatt@martinsvillebulletin.com

A woman who had been shot in the face and was nearing death, her unborn child perhaps already dead, lay on the front porch of a house in Fieldale on Tuesday night and told a Henry County Sheriff's deputy who had pulled the trigger just minutes earlier.

Krystal Anne McReynolds, 34, of McKinley Drive in Bassett died the

next day in a hospital in Roanoke but not before she had fought through her injuries to identify Christopher McDowell, 35, of 42 Badger Drive in Fieldale as the man who had shot her, sheriff's office reports say.

On Friday Henry County General District Court Judge James R. McGarry denied bond for McDowell on charges of possession of a weapon by a violent felon and malicious assault where the victim is injured.

McDowell remains in the Henry

County Jail also charged with second-degree murder and use of a firearm in the commission of a felony-first offense. More charges could be coming.

McReynolds was shot on the front porch of 60 Fourth St. in Fieldale. Her unborn child died that night, and she succumbed on Wednesday at Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital.

The Medical Examiner's Office in Roanoke ruled the death of McReynolds and her unborn child as

homicides, according to a release late Friday morning from HCSO Capt. Wayne Davis.

"McReynolds died as the result of a gunshot wound," the release stated. "The cause of death for the unborn child was found to be maternal trauma."

Davis said the Sheriff's Office and the Commonwealth's Attorney Office will determine additional charges or



Christopher McDowell remains in the Henry County Jail.

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Stoneleigh Estate, the historic mansion home of former Virginia Gov. Thomas Stanley, is one of the properties available to rent by visitors on Airbnb.com.

Airbnb is providing income for area homeowners and expanding lodging options for visitors across the state.

By Kim Barto Meeks  
kim.meeks@martinsvillebulletin.com

Looking for a place to stay during race weekend or Rooster Walk? You can book a historic log cabin in the heart of Martinsville, sleep in a renovated train caboose on the edge of Patrick County or even host 10 people in the elegant, Jazz Age mansion of a former Virginia governor.

These are just a few of the local options listed on Airbnb.com, an online platform for short-term housing rentals that started in 2008 and has since grown to 7 million listings across the globe. For a small fee, the site allows homeowners to earn money by renting out their vacant houses, mother-in-law suites or spare bedrooms directly to travelers.

In Martinsville, Henry and Patrick counties, Airbnb hosts and tourism officials say they've seen the number and popularity of these local lodgings

increase.

And, if the turnout at a recent workshop is any indication, more homeowners are interested in joining the website.

A day of severe storms and flooding that closed schools throughout southern Virginia didn't stop about 40 people from packing a classroom in Stuart to learn "How to AirBnB." The Patrick County Chamber and Visit Patrick County VA organized the event.

During this 2-hour workshop, Sandy Ratliff of Virginia Community Capital took property owners through the process of getting started as Airbnb hosts.

Ratliff called short-term lodging "perfect for the southwest [of Virginia]." She explained in her presentation that Airbnb offers residents the opportunity to start small businesses

SEE ROOM | A9



Fishel Cottage (photo from Airbnb site, used with permission by property owner): The historic Fishel Cottage was built as a guesthouse in the early 1930s near uptown Martinsville. It is one of the properties available to rent on Airbnb.com.

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### WEATHER

Sunny to partly cloudy during the day with clouds increasing tonight.  
For detailed weather information, see Page A2



Weather contributed to precarious driving conditions Thursday.  
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# Room

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and to earn extra income; provides choices to travelers who want a unique, home-like lodging experience; and it can help meet visitor demand in areas that are growing as tourism hubs.

That's especially true for rural Patrick County, where traditional lodging options are more limited than in Martinsville.

"The county has been working for years on getting a known chain hotel here," said Rebecca Adcock, executive director of the Patrick County Chamber of Commerce. Lacking that, she said, Airbnb offers more places for visitors to stay at a variety of prices.

"We do have a few options," including the acclaimed luxury resort Primland, but "the price point doesn't always work for everyone," she said. There is also a new guesthouse in Stuart called Uptown Suites, which has four rooms.

"I would like to see more lodging options created for people to stay here," Adcock said. "Hopefully with Airbnb, we can increase tourism in our community."

## Bringing wealth to the commonwealth

Airbnb hosts in Virginia earned nearly \$104 million in 2018, with each host typically earning \$5,500 in supplemental income, Ratliff said.

It's hard to say for certain how much of that money came to Southside Virginia. Tourism offices keep up with hotel occupancy rates and other lodging data by subscribing to the Smith Travel Accommodations Report, but "we do not currently receive any reporting from Airbnb properties," said Sarah Hodges, director of tourism and talent development for Martinsville-Henry County.

However, based on what she has seen, "I think it [Airbnb] is already here and seems to be doing well," Hodges said.

A search on Airbnb.com shows about 50 properties listed in Martinsville and Henry County, with an average price of \$100. These include private bedrooms in a shared home ranging from \$22 to \$45, while an entire house or apartment can be rented for as low as \$48 into the low hundreds.

Patrick County has about 80 or 90 listings, averaging \$140 a night. Many are mountain cabins, but some unique lodgings are available — including a stay in a refurbished train car. Grassy Creek Caboozes, on the border of Patrick and Carroll counties, features three actual cabooses-turned-bedroom suites available for \$99 a night.

When deciding how much to charge, Ratliff recommends that hosts look at local hotels as well as other Airbnbs in the area.

"Keep an eye on your competitor's pricing. If you are charging a price too high, then you are losing bookings. If you are charging too low, you are leaving money on the table," she said.

Hosts can also charge higher rates during popular travel times, she said.

In Patrick County, those times tend to be "fall, because of the leaves, and summer, because our temperatures are cooler than Greensboro and the Triad," Adcock said. "We do get race traffic" from Martinsville Speedway, she said.

Other popular events include the local Front Porch Fest on Labor Day weekend, and Floyd-fest at the end of July — which, despite the name, is actually held in Patrick County.

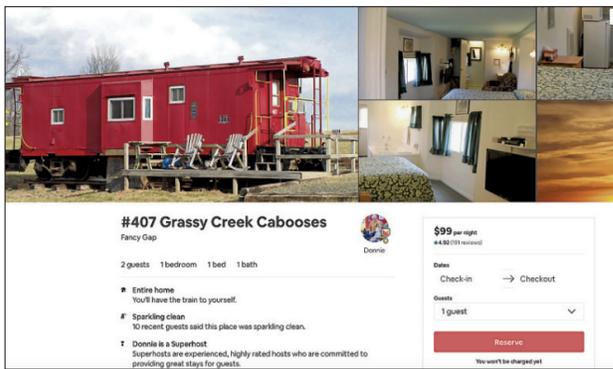
In Martinsville and Henry County, figures from 2017 and 2018 show June, August and October generally have the highest hotel occupancy rates, ranging from 61.7% to 82%, Hodges said. This is based on the four hotels with indoor corridors: Baymont Inn, Comfort Inn, Super 8, and Hampton Inn. December and January tend to be the lowest-occupancy times, she said.

Local Airbnb owners say they also see a boost in traffic during the spring and fall NASCAR races and other large events.

Janie Cassell, who operates an Airbnb in Ridgeway, said her property already is booked for the spring race and Rooster Walk Music & Arts Festival, both held



Severe storms didn't stop people from packing a classroom in Patrick County for a recent workshop on "How to AirBnB," led by Sandy Ratliff of Virginia Community Capital.



This screenshot from Airbnb.com shows one of the properties available to rent near the Patrick County line — an actual train caboose converted into a bedroom suite.

in May. "I've even rented it for the furniture market," she said.

Cassell, who attended Ratliff's workshop, is a retiree and said she started her Airbnb listing "as kind of a side hobby." She bought a 5-bedroom, 3-bath property near her home and "started playing HGTV with it."

"People seem to be very happy with it. I usually provide snacks, put out some fruit, just try to make it a pleasant experience for the guests," she said.

Cassell's advice to new hosts? "Just do your homework," she said.

In addition to the time of year, Ratliff encouraged hosts to think about any special amenities on the property that may warrant a higher price. Cassell's listing, for example, features a hot tub and game room.

## Home sweet historic home

"People are looking for that unique experience" when they stay in an Airbnb, Adcock said.

For some, that means staying in a mansion that's part of local history. Just added to the website in October is the stately, white-columned home of the late R.M. "Dick" Simmons Jr., former chairman and CEO of American of Martinsville. Renting the entire 6-bedroom house on Oakdale Street near uptown Martinsville costs \$350 a night. Individual bedrooms can also be rented separately.

If that's not big enough, the 7-bedroom, 6.5-bath Stoneleigh Estate can be yours for \$900 a night. This 1926 Tudor mansion in Stanleytown, crafted out of stone from the nearby Smith River, is the former home of Virginia Governor Thomas B. Stanley.

Cindy Edgerton has managed Stoneleigh's Airbnb bookings for five years on behalf of the home's owners, who live out of the country. She also manages a historic cabin on her property in Fieldale and recently opened a bed-and-breakfast, One Starling, in uptown Martinsville.

"I'm as busy as I want to be," especially in the spring and fall, Edgerton said. Stoneleigh is popular for events and weddings. Thanks to the Airbnb platform, she said, "I don't feel like I need to do additional advertising."

Fellow Airbnb host Lynn Pritchett manages three properties: Fishel Cottage, Minter Manor and Highland House. One was operated as an early Airbnb-style homestay decades before the website — or even the web — even existed, she said. Fishel Cottage, a quaint log cabin, was built in the 1930s as a guesthouse behind another historic home near uptown Martinsville.

Pritchett and her husband,

Asbury, were actually the first local hosts to join Airbnb. Before that, they worked with the tourism department to create a business plan and built a website to list their properties at martinsvilleguesthouses.com.

"We had decided to move uptown, but our house on Corn Tassel didn't sell, so we had to get creative," Pritchett said. "I told my husband that I thought Martinsville needed a bed and breakfast — there was not one here at the time — so I came up with the idea to do a bed and kitchen."

Now, she said, "We're pretty constantly busy. We've been doing this long enough that we have repeat customers."

## Online convenience

Having operated lodging with and without Airbnb, both Pritchett and Edgerton agree the platform is helpful in many ways.

"Airbnb is much easier," Edgerton said. "You don't have to worry about collecting payment, and they carry some insurance. They can mediate for you if they need to. And the fee that you pay really is worth it. It's a pretty minimal fee, and you're paying for advertisement, too."

The website charges hosts 3% of each booking. Guests pay an additional booking fee to Airbnb, as well.

"There's a phone app that makes it easy," Pritchett said. "You get to give feedback about the people who stay with you. People are able to leave comments and say what they liked about your place. You can achieve the rank of 'superhost,' which is helpful."

Both Pritchett and Edgerton have been designated "superhosts" by Airbnb, meaning they are "experienced, highly-rated hosts," the website states.

Edgerton said the website's review system "helps keep people on the up and up." Guests and hosts rate each other after each stay, and their ratings and comments — positive or negative — appear on their Airbnb profiles for life.

"I like it, because it makes both parties try very hard. The guests want a good reputation, and the venue wants a good reputation," she said. "You can always private message each other if something isn't working right."

Edgerton said she has considered listing One Starling on Airbnb, but so far her bookings are completely through word of mouth, she said.

"I will see how it does — I wanted to start off slowly and get it right," she said. "It's growing. I have to deal with payments directly, but I haven't had any issues."

Edgerton recommends that

homeowners setting up an Airbnb account for the first time select the option of pre-screening renters instead of enabling them to "instant book." This allows hosts the opportunity to see if the guest has low reviews before allowing them to book the property.

This is preferable because "if someone books and you cancel it, it hurts your reputation," she said. "I like the freedom to choose. I've not had anyone trash the place, or not pay."

Getting to know the community Both Edgerton and Pritchett said they enjoy staying in other Airbnbs when they travel.

"It's a way to get to know the soul of an area," Edgerton said. "I think it definitely helps the economy — it gives more of a personal touch."

One advantage of the website is it allows users to choose lodging within walking distance of local attractions.

"We like using Airbnb when we travel. You can use the map and find something very close to where you want to stay," Pritchett said. "It's pretty easy to use the software to get a preview of the property, see pictures and comments. A lot of times the host will leave what their interests are, so you can choose someone with similar interests" and get recommendations of things to do, she added.

Edgerton said she makes recommendations of local restaurants and events to her guests. "I enjoy getting to know people and showing off our community."

According to an Airbnb survey of more than 35,000 users in the U.S., this is typical: 92% of Airbnb hosts say they recommend restaurants and cafes to guests, and 56% say they recommend cultural activities such as museums, festivals, and historical sites to guests. On average, Airbnb guests say 41% of their spending occurs in the neighborhood where they stay, according to the survey.

"I want all businesses in our area to do well," Edgerton said. "I would feel guilty if I was taking money away from our hotels. But our best hotels stay booked."

Hodges agreed. "I think both the available hotel stock and the Airbnb properties have a purpose to serve in our community. According to the STR report, in 2019 our average occupancy for hotels in 2018 was 61%, up from 53.6% in 2017," she said.

## No vacancy for Airbnb?

In other parts of Virginia and across the country, however, not everyone has welcomed home-sharing sites into their communities. Airbnb has come under fire from affordable housing advocates, who say the rentals raise housing costs and push out local residents; and lodging industry groups, who say lack of regulation gives the platform an unfair advantage.

News reports show controversy has ensued when developers have bought up real estate for the purpose of converting homes and apartments into short-term rentals, displacing residents.

The Economic Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank, released a report in January 2019 that found the expansion of Airbnb contributes to a "reduced supply of housing as properties shift from serving local residents to serving Airbnb travelers, which

hurts local residents by raising housing costs."

In addition, local governments continue to grapple with how to regulate this emerging industry sector and collect taxes from hosts. The company has been part of several lawsuits going up against short-term lodging rules in major cities, such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York.

Virginia leaves it up to each locality to set rules for short-term rentals. In some localities, hosts are required to obtain permits or pay additional fees.

In April 2019, Virginia Beach announced it was investigating more than 500 new Airbnb listings that might have failed to register and pay taxes to the city. The City Council passed a number of regulations on short-term housing that went into effect in November, including limiting the number of people who can stay in a listing.

In Charlottesville, the third-most-popular Airbnb destination in Virginia, hosts are asked to get a homestay permit and business license, as well as paying lodging tax. The city's Housing Advisory Committee began a study in November in response to concerns that short-term rentals are taking available properties off the market for locals.

In Richmond, all of the estimated 1,200 Airbnbs are technically illegal — city code prohibits rentals of less than 30 days in residential properties. Regardless of the prohibition, hosts brought in \$3.8 million last year, according to Airbnb. Richmond City Council is considering an ordinance to legalize and regulate the service after the city's planning commission approved the measure in January.

"In Abingdon, there is a rule you cannot rent out your property more than 90 days out of the year," Ratliff said during the workshop. "I think it's due to lobbying by the hotel industry in the town."

Martinsville and Henry County do not appear to have passed ordinances specific to regulating Airbnbs. However, this doesn't mean local hosts are off the hook from getting a business license or paying taxes.

"Who thinks they don't have to pay taxes? What world are you in?" Ratliff asked during the workshop. She recommends that all hosts contact their local government for the requirements and "do your research."

Airbnb automatically charges the 5.3% state sales tax for listings in Virginia, but in many places, hosts are responsible for collecting and turning in lodging taxes themselves. In Virginia, Airbnb only collects lodging taxes on behalf of Abingdon, Alexandria and Blacksburg, Ratliff said. In Patrick County, for example, 5% of each overnight stay is due every quarter.

## Be neighborly

In addition to complying with local government rules, hosts must make sure they stay on good terms with their neighbors. Having an Airbnb in the neighborhood can lead to increased traffic on the street, parking issues and the potential for noisy renters, Ratliff said.

That's why she recommends talking to neighboring property owners before launching a lodging business.

"How do you think they will feel when you start hosting an Airbnb? How would you react or respond to irate neighbors?" she said during the workshop.

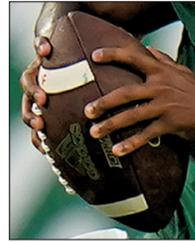
Prescreening potential renters can help prevent illegal parties. Airbnb announced in December it would intensify screenings of listings for guest safety and to crack down on "party rentals." The platform also started a new hotline at the end of December for neighbors to call with complaints.

Despite these considerations, local Airbnb owners say hosting is worth it.

"There's something to be said for hospitality itself," Pritchett said. "Even if you never meet the people, just knowing that you've provided a place that's safe and comfortable for them — there's some gratification in that."

Kim Barto Meeks is a reporter for the Martinsville Bulletin. She can be reached at 276-638-8801.

**RUTH BADER GINSBURG:  
COLLEAGUES  
REMEMBER JUSTICE  
FONDLY » PAGE A9**



**COLLEGE FOOTBALL:  
UVA AND HOKIES  
TO TRY AGAIN IN  
DECEMBER » SPORTS**

# MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

THE VOICE OF THE COMMUNITY FOR 130 YEARS

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## Child care is not child's play



Fourth-grader Oliver Saunders (left) and fifth-grader James Tatum play with paper spinners they made at the YMCA in Collinsville, one of the local child care providers that has expanded all-day services for elementary and middle school students while public schools are closed for remote learning.

Financial help and child care services are available in Martinsville and Henry County for parents of school-aged children while public school buildings remain closed for remote learning.

By Kim Barto Meeks  
kim.meeks@martinsvillebulletin.com

It has been more than a month since public schools in Martinsville and Henry County started the school year virtually, and many students and their families still are adjusting to the demands of learning through a screen.

The good news? Area child care providers have been making adjustments of their own to support working parents while school buildings are closed. This has meant stepping up services to elementary and middle school students who suddenly found themselves without adult supervision during the remote school day.

In addition, a local child care task force launched a website and new pot of funding last month to help the families of school-aged children find and pay for

SEE KIDS | A8



Joanie Petty (far left), executive director of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Blue Ridge, visits elementary school students Friday at the new "Center Club" site at McCabe Memorial Baptist Church. The organization normally provides afterschool programming onsite at schools in Martinsville and Henry County, but those buildings are closed to students while virtual schooling continues. This meant BGCBR had to switch up its operations and find new locations, such as churches, to provide a socially distanced place for students to go during the remote school day.

KIM BARTO MEEKS/MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

## Deadly week's count: 23 lost

That's how many have been reported dead from COVID-19 since Monday in the West Piedmont Health District.

By STAFF REPORT

Saturday concluded the deadliest week for reported deaths from COVID-19 in the West Piedmont Health District with three more people have passed from the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

That makes 23 deaths recorded by the Virginia Department of Health since Monday and 62 since the pandemic statistics first were compiled about six months ago – an increase of 60% in six days. There were 21 deaths reported during the entire month of August.

VDH officials were careful to point out earlier this week that not all of those nearly two dozen people actually died this week. They simply were recorded after the staff confirmed cause of death from death certificates.

Since Thursday four residents of Martinsville and two from Henry County were those listed by VDH, making 15 deaths of residents of the city and 20 from the county.

VDH calculates that 116.3 people per 100,000 city residents have died from the virus. In the county that rate is 39.3.

Patrick County, which has the most deaths in the district (24) has one of the highest per capita rates in the state: 135.8.

In the U.S. the number of deaths on Saturday surpassed 200,000.

There were 37 more cases of the virus reported in the district on Friday and Saturday, with Henry County approaching 1,000 cases

SEE VIRUS | A8

## 'She would give her all to you'

Longtime Martinsville voice, music teacher Ruth Pace will be honored Thursday in livestreamed show.



Ruth Pace

students into musicians will be honored with a TheatreWorks Community Players livestreamed program on Thursday.

Jonathan Penn, one of those students, is the show director of "A Night in Time with Ruth Pace."

Pace, 95, still lives on the family farm in Ridgeway, and Joyce Irvin, who lives down the road from her, has helped her around for the past

decade. Some of Pace's former students shared stories of her superior musical talent which was matched by her famous beauty and classic elegance.

"What can I do but look like a lady when I'm responsible for these babies," Pace said during a Friday visit with former students Penn and Vicky Pulliam Nelson, after Nelson complimented her outfit. Pace calls her former students her "babies."

SEE MUSIC | A7



HOLLY KOZELSKY/MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

Retired Martinsville choral teacher Ruth Pace enjoys a visit with one of her "babies" — as she refers to her students — Jonathan Penn, who is planning a tribute show for her.

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### WEATHER

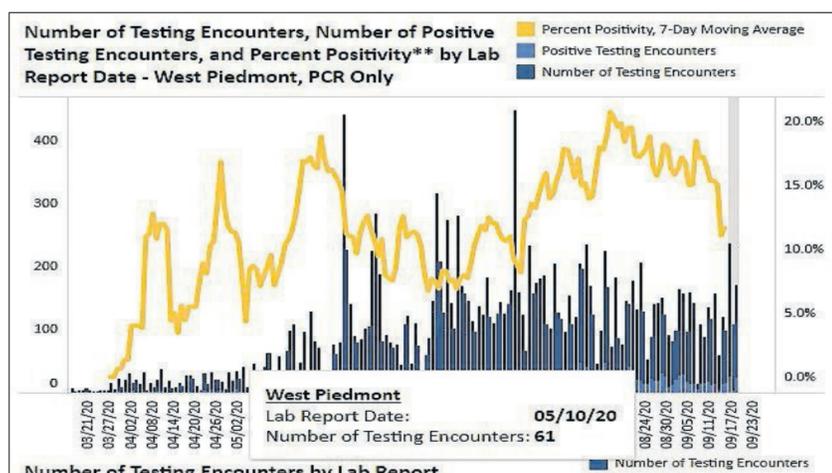
Mostly sunny and chilly with a drop in temperature in the evening.  
For detailed weather information, see Page A2

Martinsville and Henry County are reporting a steady flow of voters.

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## Virus

From Page A1

and Franklin County – where numbers have been slow to grow – now has moved past 300. There were also a half-dozen new hospitalizations. Patrick County, which earlier this week saw a surge in deaths, had no new cases, hospitalizations or deaths.

The breakdowns for the past two days is like this:

» **Henry County:** 13 cases, 3

hospitalizations and 2 deaths.

» **Martinsville:** 5, 2, 4.

» **Patrick County:** 0, 0, 0.

» **Franklin County:** 19, 1, 0.

The resting rate in the district is slightly lower than it had been, but 11.7% positivity (out of more than 17,750 tests) is nearly double the state's average of 6.2%.

The Virginia Department of Health reported Saturday that there have been 139,655 cases and 2,990 deaths statewide — up by 41 from Friday. Some 10,562 people have been hos-

pitalized.

Henry County has had 996 cases, with 109 hospitalizations and 20 deaths. Martinsville has had 375 cases, with 60 hospitalizations and 15 deaths. Patrick County has had 269 cases including 51 hospitalizations and 24 deaths. Franklin County has had 303 cases, 16 hospitalizations and three deaths.

By comparison, Danville has reported 811 cases, and Pittsylvania County has had 941.

# Two sentenced in guns, drugs cases

By Bill Wyatt  
bill.wyatt@martinsvillebulletin.com

A Ridgeway man was sentenced on drug charges and a Martinsville man was sentenced on gun charges in Martinsville Circuit Court on Thursday.

Courts in Martinsville have not been very active because of COVID-19 restrictions, but more cases on the docket are being heard lately, particularly in Martinsville Circuit Court.

Brent Douglas Wagoner of Ridgeway was sentenced to 10 years for distribution of heroin and 5 years for distribution of naloxone on Oct. 25, 2018. He also was sentenced to 5 years for distribution of imitation heroin on Jan. 14, 2019. All 20 years in prison were suspended.

Wagoner was sentenced to 30 days with 28 suspended in Henry County General District Court on Aug. 13 for shoplifting on Oct. 23.

He's due back in Martinsville Cir-



**Demonte Lawon Waller**



**Brent Douglas Wagoner**

cuit Court on Nov. 10 for his arraignment for distribution of heroin and distribution of fentanyl on April 22, 2019.

Also in Martinsville Circuit Court on Thursday, Demonte Lawon Waller of Martinsville was sentenced to 10 years for maliciously shooting into an occupied dwelling, 5 years for property damage and 12 months for shooting in a public place with no injury. All 16 years in prison were suspended.

Friday morning in Martinsville Circuit Court Chelsea Glen Sturgeon of Martinsville pleaded guilty to the illegal manufacture of alcohol and fined \$507 including court costs.

Bill Wyatt is a reporter for the Martinsville Bulletin. He can be reached at 276-638-8801, Ext. 236.

## Kids

From Page A1

care. ChildcareMHC.org features a comprehensive list of child care facilities in Martinsville and Henry County, along with frequent updates about which ones have available slots. The website also includes information on how to apply for the Emergency Childcare Scholarship Fund.

In August, the governments of Henry County and Martinsville donated a combined \$160,000 from their federal coronavirus relief funds to the local United Way to provide child care aid to parents who meet certain income requirements. Families needing care for children ages 4 to 12 can apply for subsidies of up to \$50 per week per child, payable to the child care provider of the family's choice.

United Way Executive Director Philip Wenkstern said the scholarship attracted a lot of interest from the beginning. The program was announced on a Wednesday afternoon, Aug. 12; by noon the following Monday, they had received more than 60 applications, which he called "phenomenal."

Now, more than 120 children are receiving the subsidy, Wenkstern said Friday.

"Obviously, this program is needed if we've gotten that level of response," he said. "There are a lot of families that are hurting right now and certainly did not plan on incorporating monthly child care fees into their household budget. Our goal is just to make sure children have a safe place to be and learn safely in the community."

Eligibility for this emergency scholarship depends on household size and income, in contrast to an earlier aid program that was limited to essential workers in certain fields.

Back in March, The Harvest Foundation gave \$150,000 to the United Way and Smart Beginnings of Martinsville-Henry County for emergency child care relief. Their original goal was to make sure medical personnel and first responders had access to child care during school closures, so they could continue showing up to work.

At that time, "we were triaging what we thought the community needed from a public health perspective," Wenkstern said.

As the economy has opened up and more people are back at work, the task force's focus has shifted — especially with schools still holding remote classes. Smart Beginnings has been surveying local parents to learn about the child care challenges they're facing as a result of COVID-19.

"The number one challenge that parents indicated on the survey was the cost of child care," said Ruth Anne Collins, early education and family resource coordinator for Smart Beginnings. "Especially for parents whose children have traditionally been in school and now they're having to pay for all-day care, I can see how that would be a challenge."

### Pandemic hits industry

Even before the pandemic, affordable child care was difficult to find in many parts of the country. In Martinsville and Henry County, a group of community partners convened by The Harvest Foundation had been studying the issue for several months before the virus hit Virginia.

Then, COVID-19 made the nationwide shortage worse.

Gov. Ralph Northam's executive order shutting down schools and non-essential businesses in mid-March did not require private child care centers to close; rather, state officials encouraged providers to stay open for emergency child care if they could meet social distancing guidelines and other health precautions.

However, financial challenges forced thousands of centers to close anyway. With much of the child care industry operating on "razor-thin margins" long before the pandemic, many could not afford to stay open due to limited enrollment and increased expenses, according to the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

An April news release from the governor's office reported that 2,672 child care centers — nearly 45% of providers in Virginia — had closed, eliminating slots for 200,000 children.

At the national level, 370,600 child care workers lost jobs between February and April, the National Women's Law Center reported. Although some of these losses were temporary, the industry has still not fully recovered months

later; as of July, the U.S. child care workforce was at 79% of its normal size before the pandemic.

### Defying that trend

Fortunately, Martinsville and Henry County seem to be defying the negative national trends. Area child care providers saw an initial drop in enrollment and capacity during the stay-at-home orders, but the industry has mostly bounced back.

"We were very fortunate in our community in terms of how few closures we had, compared to other places," Wenkstern said. "We really appreciate providers continuing to step up to the plate."

Among the 18 child care sites in Martinsville and Henry County, "We had three programs close temporarily for a couple weeks for cleaning or just to give the staff some protection," Collins said. "But we only had one program close permanently, and they had announced they were closing before this hit."

And instead of cutting jobs, local providers are having the opposite problem: They desperately need more staff. That includes the area's largest centers, the YMCA and Boys & Girls Clubs of the Blue Ridge, which are both hiring.

"With the smaller class sizes, they need more teachers," Collins said. "I've heard from quite a few that need either part-time or full-time workers."

The total number of child care slots in the community is back to "normal or near-normal, and in some cases programs have increased numbers," she said. "Right now, there are some available slots if parents are looking for school-aged care."

Collins stays in frequent contact with local providers to track the number of openings and keep the listing on ChildcareMHC.org updated. Currently, the website shows three child care facilities with a total of about 17 available spaces for school-aged children, Collins said.

Smart Beginnings also has a phone hotline for parents who have questions or need help finding child care at 276-403-5528.

### Shifting the risk

After the decision to start the school year remotely sent some parents into panic mode, local child care facilities began working to step up services to elementary and middle school students.

But setting up spaces to accommodate virtual learning and adhering to health guidelines during a pandemic has been a complicated process.

Some organizations, such as the Martinsville-Henry County YMCA and the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Blue Ridge, pivoted with only a few weeks' notice from afterschool programming to offering full-day care for schoolchildren.

This has required an array of changes like extending hours of operation, installing more electrical outlets for students to charge devices, adding internet bandwidth to classroom spaces, hiring more staff, or even moving to a new location.

The Martinsville-Henry County Family YMCA has stayed open to provide emergency child care to essential workers since March, but Executive Director Brad Kinkema said he has seen a surge in demand with schools starting.

"We currently have a wait list. Part of that is because we're only putting so many kids in a classroom" to allow for social distancing, Kinkema said. "Normally we would have 125 at our Collinsville site. Now we have 70."

Kinkema also said the YMCA still needs more staff. They are hiring child care workers for both preschool and school-aged children.

Students who spend their school days at the Collinsville YMCA are divided into small groups that stay together as a "pod," avoiding mingling with other groups as much as possible. In areas where students might line up, such as outside of restrooms, there are distancing marks 6 feet apart showing them where to stand.

"We're trying to do the best of our ability to space kids out in the classrooms," Kinkema said.

"We're getting acrylic desk dividers so the kids will have their own little area."

Older students tend to adjust better to the social distancing rules, he added. "The younger the kid, obviously the harder it is. At the preschool, you walk in and they kids want to hug you. It's hard to explain, no, you can't hug."

In addition to distancing, the Y takes everyone's temperature and screens for symptoms before entering. Adults must wear masks. Parents and visitors are asked not to venture

beyond the front desk to limit potential exposure.

"We've been very fortunate and very diligent about putting in protocols and keeping kids safe," Kinkema said.

However, he added, while public school classrooms are closed, "the risk hasn't gone away. The risk has just shifted to the child care providers."

"There's a lot of talk about the fear of sending kids back to school because of COVID, and I understand that. But understand that the kids are going somewhere, to the Y or other child care providers," Kinkema said. "Just because you've closed schools doesn't mean every kid is at home."

One of the biggest challenges staff members face with remote schooling is learning to navigate different software and virtual classroom spaces, Kinkema said. Staff and teachers have been learning how to use Canvas, the platform used in Henry County Schools, in order to help students with their work.

"If we have 12 kids in a classroom, most likely they're from different schools and different teachers, so you have to navigate 12 different systems," he said. Staff have to figure out "how do you pull the page up? What password does the child have? Where is their homework located on the website?"

Kinkema's message to families is "to just be patient with us. This is new for everybody. We're trying to do the best that we can to learn and meet the needs of the parents and the kids. We're happy to provide this care."

### Clubs find new home

The Boys & Girls Clubs of the Blue Ridge normally operate afterschool programming onsite at various schools in the city and county. So when school buildings shut down in March, the clubs did, too — temporarily.

Closing five sites impacted more than 300 local youth and required cutting more than one-third of the club staff, according to BGCBR Executive Director Joanie Petty. The organization kept a skeleton crew in place as they worked to set up emergency care for the children of medical personnel and other essential workers.

Two weeks later, the club was back in business, but serving a much smaller group. Space constraints and social distancing

meant they could serve 36 youth at the BGCBR Teen Center site on East Church Street.

Out of 98 Boys & Girls Clubs organizations in Virginia, BGCBR ended up being one of only two clubs to reopen and stay open through the summer, Petty said.

"It was so important for this organization to stay open because we knew that 74% of our children are from single-parent homes," she said. "Those are working parents. If we closed, with 360 club members, that's a lot of kids who will not have a place to go."

When news came in late July that school buildings would remain closed for an indefinite period of time, club leaders had to get creative to serve more students during the school day.

"Our capacity and our entire operating model have changed," Petty said. "The pandemic has pushed us to creatively think about our program design and operational framework and innovate those models into an all-day club experience."

That required finding additional locations. With a few weeks to go before local schools started on Aug. 10, club leaders were on the hunt for a new home. They ended up finding two: the Uptown Ministry Center on East Main Street and McCabe Memorial Baptist Church on Clearview Drive.

Between these new sites and the Teen Center, BGCBR is serving 110 students — about one-third of its normal capacity. However, Petty said, the club is continuing to hire new staff and can enroll more students once that happens.

Meanwhile, Smart Beginnings and the rest of the child care task force are continuing to monitor the situation locally and see how they can help providers and families.

"We're just waiting to see from week to week how the COVID situation is in our area so we can start preparing for schools to start some version of in-person classes again," Collins said. "We're just trying to listen to parents and families in the community and see how we can support them. It's just so important that the children are getting what they need in terms of continuing with their education."

Kim Barto Meeks is a reporter for the Martinsville Bulletin. She can be reached at 276-638-8801.

# MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

THE VOICE OF THE COMMUNITY FOR 130 YEARS

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## Visits OK'd for nursing homes

Mulberry Creek will be the first facility to allow visitors based on CMS guidelines, but the rules are strict.

By Holly Kozelsky  
holly.kozelsky@martinsvillebulletin.com

Mulberry Creek Nursing & Rehab in Martinsville appears to be the first long-term care facility in the area that will offer in-person visits indoors or outdoors. Mulberry Creek said in an email to residents' families that allowing for in-person visits, starting Oct. 13, was a result of new guidance from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). "We are pleased to announce that CMS recently released new guidance that will allow nursing homes to open for visita-

tion during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (PHE)," Mulberry Creek Chief Administration Officer Bob Nelson wrote to residents' families on Sept. 30. To keep residents safe, "Kissito Healthcare will be opening our facilities for visitation under the following guidelines that are consistent with CMS/CDC guidance," that email to families states. Kissito is Mulberry Creek's parent company. Those guidelines are: » People who want to visit must show negative COVID-19 test results dated

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BULLETIN FILE PHOTO

Mulberry Creek Health & Rehab is the only known area nursing home to resume visits, albeit under strict guidelines.

## Back on track

The New Railway Cafe in Bassett goes full steam ahead despite delays from COVID-19, continuing the area's revitalization.

By Kim Barto Meeks  
kim.meeks@martinsvillebulletin.com

Kayla Shelton was almost ready to open her new restaurant in Bassett earlier this spring when the COVID-19 pandemic threatened to derail her plans. "We were about 90% ready to go," Shelton said. "I was about to call the health department [for inspection before opening] when COVID hit. That stalled us up a bit." Now, the family-run Railway Cafe in Bassett is back on track after a 6-month delay. The eatery opened Sept. 21 on the Reed Stone block, serving up breakfast, gourmet coffee, salads, grilled sandwiches and fries within view of the train tracks and the historic Bassett depot. In its first two weeks of operation, Shelton said, "We have had a really outstanding turnout of



KIM BARTO MEEKS/MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

Railway Cafe owner Kayla Shelton (far left) stands outside the new restaurant in Bassett that she runs with her family: (from left) Melissa Shelton, Sarah Boyd, Cheyanne Boyd and Thomas Shelton.

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KIM BARTO MEEKS/MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

The recently opened Railway Cafe features a new outdoor patio seating area, where diners have a view of trains rumbling by the former Bassett Train Depot.

## Trump leaves hospital



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

President Donald Trump walks out of Walter Reed National Military Medical Center to return to the White House on Monday.

Wearing a mask, President Donald Trump left Walter Reed National Military Medical Center for a waiting SUV that carried him to Marine One for the short helicopter flight back to the White House. Trump's doctor said the president would not be fully "out of the woods" for another week. **Story on A6**

## Another COVID victim in the city

Martinsville claims one of state's three COVID-19 deaths announced Monday.

Staff report

There were only three deaths from COVID-19 in Virginia announced Monday morning, and one of those was in Martinsville. That's the 21st resident of the city — one of the last in the state to have had a

positive test of the novel coronavirus — to have died from the disease caused by that virus, based on data released by the Virginia Department of Health. VDH tracks deaths by the locality of residence and releases very little other information. Reports of deaths routinely lag by several days as investigators wait to check cause in death certificates issued by the state.

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VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

This graphic shows the dramatic increase in COVID-19 deaths in Martinsville since the beginning of September.

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### WEATHER

Mostly sunny and warmer. Clear tonight.  
For detailed weather information, see Page A2

75 HIGH 49 LOW



Companies looking to hire 400-plus. Page A3



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**Freda Jane Knight****July 31, 1953 - October 4, 2020**

Freda Jane Knight of Ridgeway, passed away on Sunday, October 4, 2020, at home. She was born on July 31, 1953, to the late Emmett E. and Mary Collier Knight. Freda was a 1971 graduate of Drewry Mason High School and was self-employed as a bookkeeper for 32 years. She enjoyed reading, fishing and her grandchildren.

Freda is survived by a daughter, Rebecca C. Johnson (Rocky); a son, Robert A. Knight (Scotty); four sisters, Kaye Edwards, Faye Coe (Terry), Charlotte Gilley (Ken) and Betsy Donley (Jody); five grandchildren, Zachary Gillespie, LeeAnna Ferguson, Kaden Knight, Ava Knight and Tal Richardson; and a special companion, Harry "Tom" Guynn.

The funeral will be on Thursday October 8, 2020, at 11 a.m. at Wright Funeral Service with Christopher Coe officiating. Burial will follow at Mountain View Cemetery. The visitation will be on Wednesday, October 7, 2020, from 5 until 7 p.m., at Wright Funeral Service Chapel, and other times at the home of her daughter, Rebecca Johnson, at 1665 Phospho Springs Road in Ridgeway.

Memorials may be made to Mountain Valley Hospice, 730 East Church Street, Martinsville, VA 24112.

Wright Funeral Service & Crematory is serving the family. Online condolences may be made at [www.wrightfuneralservices.net](http://www.wrightfuneralservices.net).



# State to get boost for Medicaid costs

By Michael Martz  
Richmond Times-Dispatch

Virginia will get additional federal emergency relief for Medicaid through the end of March on top of more than a half-billion dollars that the state saved in reduced spending in the last fiscal year, primarily because of an abrupt decline in use of medical services during COVID-19 pandemic.

U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar announced late Friday that the federal government would extend the public health emergency through late January, ensuring that the federal government will pay an additional 6.2% share of Virginia's Medicaid costs through March 31, state Medicaid officials told legislators on Monday.

The state hasn't quantified the net savings, but the higher federal share should help offset potentially higher Medicaid costs because of soaring enrollment during the COVID-19 pandemic as Gov. Ralph Northam

looks ahead to the revised budget he will present to lawmakers in mid-December for the General Assembly to begin considering in January.

"Absolutely good news," said Del. Mark Sickles, D-Fairfax, vice chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, after a meeting on Monday morning of the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, on which he serves.

Separately, JLARC heard mixed results from the latest report on the state's embattled IT agency. The report found that the Virginia Information Technologies agency had finally completed its transition to a new model for serving 66 executive branch state agencies while providing critical assistance to allow state employees to work remotely during the pandemic.

However, the report also found that almost two-thirds of the agencies served by VITA remain dissatisfied with their ability to connect reliably to internet networks and the IT agency's slow re-

sponse to problems, including an outage at a Virginia Department of Transportation field office that took 47 days to repair.

Chairman Ken Plum, D-Fairfax, said the performance of the 16-year-old public agency would not be acceptable in the private marketplace. "We would be bankrupt in no time with that kind of response," he said before the commission adopted a resolution directing its staff to conduct a comprehensive assessment of VITA's organization, staffing, and ability to recruit and retain qualified employees.

**Medicaid**

On Medicaid, JLARC staff reported that Virginia spent \$558 million less than expected in the fiscal year that ended June 30, almost all of it from federal funds. State spending was \$35 million less than had been projected in the last fiscal year.

The savings do not include almost \$319 million in additional federal aid under the Families First Act that

Congress adopted and President Donald Trump signed in late March.

In the current fiscal year, which began on July 1, Virginia already was projected to save a net \$242 million in state funds because of the higher federal share of Medicaid bills. The extension will reduce Virginia's share of Medicaid costs for an additional three months and relieve pressure on the general fund budget, which is supported by state tax revenues to pay for core public services such as education, public safety and health care.

"General funds are precious dollars that we need for K-12, early childhood and our higher education system now," Sickles said.

The House of Delegates and Senate are preparing to negotiate differences in their versions of the state budget that Northam introduced on Aug. 18 at the beginning of a special legislative session to deal with a projected \$2.8 billion general fund revenue shortfall in the two-year budget.

## Victim

From Page A1

There have been 77 deaths in the West Piedmont Health District, with most of them in Henry and Patrick counties (26 apiece) counties.

More than half of them — 43 — have been reported dead since

Aug. 31. That's about 1.3 per day. There also have been 254 hospitalizations, so the ratio of deaths per hospitalization is 30%, barely higher than the state's rate of (29%).

This latest death is a white woman in her 80s, which is the statistical trend across the district. VDH does not offer that data by locality.

News of the death was accompanied by another 2-day leap in positive cases that was led by the con-

tinuing dramatic surge in Franklin County.

There were 43 cases reported in the district during the past 48 hours, and Franklin County accounted for 23 of them. That's now 104 cases in that county since Sept. 25, a 31% increase in 10 days.

Henry County added 13 new cases, Martinsville had six and Patrick County, one. There were no new hospitalizations.

The West Piedmont Health District's updated cumulative totals since the pandemic began:

» **Henry County:** 1,107 cases, 121 hospitalizations, 26 deaths.

» **Martinsville:** 402, 62, 21.

» **Patrick County:** 283, 52, 65.

» **Franklin County:** 429, 19, 4.

By way of comparison, Danville has reported 958 cases, and Pittsylvania County has had 1,080. Danville had one of those two other

deaths reported Monday, too.

VDH reported that there have been 152,557 cases and 3,276 deaths statewide — up by three from Sunday — and some 11,259 people have been hospitalized.

This news emerged as worldwide cases have exceeded 35 million and in the U.S. probably by Tuesday will surpass 7.5 million. About 210,000 in the U.S. have died from COVID-19.

## Track

From Page A1

people. It's been overwhelming and exciting."

Before it became a cafe, 188 Reed Stone St. was home to Sink's Barber Shop for many years. The nonprofit Henry County Furniture Museum owns the property and began renovating it, inside and out, in the hopes of bringing more dining options to downtown Bassett. The Harvest Foundation awarded a \$35,900 grant in December to help support the project.

Meanwhile, Bassett Furniture Foundation built a spacious stone patio with a partial roof beside the restaurant. That was in summer 2019, but adding an outdoor seating area turned out to be a prescient move once the pandemic struck. So far, that has been a popular spot for socially distanced dining, Shelton said.

"We've seen the patio full a couple of times," she said.

Eventually, she hopes to have DJs and local musicians perform outside once COVID-19 condi-

tions allow people to gather safely.

**Bassett coming back to life**

The Railway Cafe isn't the only building in the neighborhood to get a facelift recently. A mix of public and private funding has been used for several capital projects aimed at revitalizing Bassett and other small communities along the Smith River.

In downtown Bassett, the former train depot across from the cafe was renovated last year into the Bassett Train Station Event Center. Improvements in the area have included a clock garden, landscaping, curb and gutter, façade work and expanded parking.

"It's really a great thing to see Bassett coming back to life," Shelton said.

The work has been spearheaded by the Smith River Small Towns Collaborative, a group convened by the Harvest Foundation in 2013 with a mission of revitalizing and marketing the unincorporated communities of Bassett, Fieldale, Stanleytown and Koehler.

**Pandemic delays opening**

Shelton has been cooking for 15 years, most re-



KIM BARTO MEEKS/MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

**True to its name, the new Railway Cafe in Bassett sits across from the railroad tracks and the former Bassett Train Depot, which has been renovated into an event center.**

cently at Fenderz. But she dreamed of starting her own venture.

With four generations of family in the restaurant business, feeding people is in Shelton's blood. Her late grandfather, Mike Roberts, owned the VC Grill and Roberts 102. Her uncles run Roberts Market Lighthouse Grille near Fairstone and Roberts Bestway Grocery & Grill (whose sign recently read "Keeping Fieldale fat for 15 years").

After finding the space on Reed Stone Street, Shelton set up the restaurant's Facebook page in August 2019 and announced she

and her family were working on opening the Railway Cafe.

"We had no idea it was going to take a year," she said.

Shelton applied and was selected for the 2020 class of Startup Martinsville-Henry County, an 8-week entrepreneurial boot camp and mentoring program run by the Chamber's Partnership for Economic Growth (C-PEG). However, they were only about halfway through when the governor ordered schools and nonessential businesses to close because of COVID-19.

During that time, "we didn't work because we have a daughter at home with asthma" and did not want to risk bringing the virus home to her, Shelton said.

Instead, she spent that time honing the menu and testing out recipes — and watching the pandemic's spread.

Virginia gradually allowed restaurants to reopen and relaxed restrictions on indoor dining, moving into Phase 3 in early July.

When the Railway Cafe finally opened in mid-September, there was already

**More Information**

» The Railway Cafe is open for dining and take-out at 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., Monday through Saturday. More information is available on Facebook at @ railwaycafeva.

a lot of online buzz among Bassett residents.

And they showed up hungry.

"We went through some food," Shelton said. "We had to have three truck orders in the first week."

Many of the menu items have a railroad theme. There's the Steam Engine, an omelet with peppers, onions, mushrooms, ham, bacon and pepperjack cheese on Texas toast. The Cattle Car is a quarter-pound hamburger with "specialty seasoning."

For an extra charge, diners can get it topped with cheese, bacon, an egg, grilled onions, avocado, pepperoni or even pineapple.

Seeing her dream of starting a restaurant come true, Shelton said, "It's been a blessing to us, and hopefully it will be a blessing to the community."

Kim Barto Meeks is a reporter for the Martinsville Bulletin. She can be reached at 276-638-8801.

## Visits

From Page A1

within 72 hours of the visit.

» All visitors must pass a screening questionnaire.

» Visits are by appointment only, during visiting hours of 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays and noon to 5 p.m. weekends.

» Only two visitors per resident are allowed, at the rate of one 30-minute visit each week.

» Visits will take place in certain locations, indoor or outdoor, but not in residents' rooms. Outside is the preference unless the weather is bad.

» Infection-control measures such as distancing,

masks and "hand hygiene" must be in place.

» People should not bring food or gifts.

» Visitors must arrive to appointments 15 minutes early.

» Physical barriers, such as Plexiglas dividers, will be in place.

Mulberry Creek "will continue to provide updates on our visitation protocols as CMS guidance changes," the letter states.

Stanleytown Health & Rehab Center Administrator Kennedy Flynn said officials there are keeping an eye on the facility's as well as the area's situation before resuming visits.

"We are following Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, CDC, and Vir-

ginia Department of Health guidelines when deciding when and how to safely resume visits and have notified our patients and families of these criteria," Flynn wrote in an email.

"When the Henry County prevalence rate is less than 10% and when our center has no positive cases of COVID-19, visitation will resume.

"We currently have one remaining positive patient, and according to the latest data from Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, the local prevalence rate is 14.1%."

King's Grant Executive Director James L. Shorter wrote in an email that "King's Grant will be able to move forward with more

options once Henry County's positive case percentage drops below 10%."

However, King's Grant has worked out creative ways for visits, he said. "The licensed areas have been very creative in allowing for visits whether it be through a glass window, gazebo, socially distanced outdoors, or balcony," he wrote. "Our team has found ways to make a visit with loved ones possible. We have accomplished this without having one single positive resident COVID-19 case."

At Martinsville Health & Rehab, "preparations are underway for indoor visits to resume, however, there are a number of considerations that impact the

timing for these visits to begin," Alan Cosby of Trio Healthcare wrote on behalf of Michael Greeley, the administrator of Martinsville Health & Rehab.

Cosby listed those considerations as the area's "COVID-positivity rate," there being an active COVID outbreak at the facility; results of ongoing surveillance testing, continued access to personal protective equipment; "creation of a designated visitation space;" and "installation of a protective barrier/divider to be utilized during resident/family member visits."

The Landmark Center and Blue Ridge Health and Rehab in Stuart did not respond to the Bulletin's

questions about visits.

In Danville, Commonwealth Senior Living at Stratford House is "only doing patio visits and window visits," said an employee who identified herself as "Danielle" on the phone.

Outdoor visits on the patio are scheduled one per hour, with each visit to last for a maximum of 30 minutes, she said. Each resident can have two visitors during each visit. Standard safety practices such as mask-wearing and social distancing must be followed.

Holly Kozelsky is a writer for the Martinsville Bulletin; contact her at 276-638-8801 ext. 243.