

Courtland nursing home confirms COVID-19 cases

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COURTLAND

Forty-nine of Southampton County's 144 confirmed cases of COVID-19 have occurred in areas with a Courtland ZIP code according to data the Virginia Department of Health released on May 27.

But for now, it's anybody's guess how many of those are employees or residents at Accordius Health, a longterm care facility that up until April was known as Courtland Health & Rehab.

Gina Williams, the facility's administrator, had confirmed to *The Tidewater News* on May 26 that there were indeed confirmed cases at Accordius but declined to specify how many. She did, however, state that Accordius had seen its first confirmed case on April 11, less than two weeks after the North Carolina-based long-term care network had acquired the Courtland facility.

The Virginia Department of Health is investigating a total of seven COVID-19 outbreaks in its Western Tidewater Health District, five of which are at longterm care facilities. The sixth is at a correctional facility and the seventh, at a congregate setting, according to the VDH's website.

That's across all of Isle of Wight County, Southampton County and the cities of Franklin and Suffolk.

"Outbreak," when applied to longterm care facilities, typically means two or more confirmed cases among residents or staff members, according to WTHD Director Dr. Todd Wagner. He, however, said he could not comment on specific outbreaks or cases at particular facilities.

VDH personnel have been on-site at Accordius offering COVID-19 testing to employees and residents, Williams confirmed. All residents, symptomatic or not, have now been tested, as has any staff member showing symptoms, she said. Residents who tested positive have been moved to a wing of the building reserved for COVID-19 patients, with those who are positive but asymptomatic further separated from those showing symptoms.

Southampton County resident Randy Heikens' mother is among those residents who have tested positive but, so far, have remained mostly asymptomatic. Though visitation is still prohibited, he's taken to traveling to the facility every other day to look in on her from outside her window. He's also been in touch with several nurses seeking updates on his mother's condition.

When he called on Mother's Day, May 10, he said one nurse had told him that two-thirds of the staff had walked out that day, allegedly over a lack of personal protective equipment, leaving only six employees in the entire building at the time he called. Another allegedly told him the weekend of May 16-17 that she had bought her own gown and PPE. A third nurse allegedly told him that as of that weekend, 10 residents had died of COVID-19. He added that this nurse, who he described as being a traveling nurse that rotates among multiple facilities, had not been wearing a mask or gloves while talking to him from inside his mother's room.

Williams, when asked about these allegations, denied the number of walk-outs and deaths that Heikens had claimed to have heard, but did admit that the facility has had some staffing issues since the pandemic began, both from those who had quit and from those who had tested positive for the virus and needed to self-quarantine. She said about half the facility's staff is now comprised of agency nurses rather than in-house hires.

"A lot of [the agency nurses] are very good," Williams said. "There are some, as soon as they get into the building, they decide they can't work in a COVID unit. That was an issue at first."

She added that the facility is now insisting to the agencies it uses that any staff they send to Accordius be made aware that there are COVID-19 patients in the building before they enter.

"I can't promise them they will be assigned to a non-COVID unit," she said. "We put them where we need them."

Williams further denied Heikens' allegations that the facility had ever run out of PPE, though she did admit that there were times over the past month or two when Accordius had nearly run out of certain supplies, such as gloves. The VDH, the Eastern Virginia Healthcare Coalition and Accordius's

corporate office have all been helping the facility to acquire the needed supplies, she said.

Williams now believes the facility to be on the road to recovery from its COVID-19 outbreak.

“The last positive [COVID-19 test] we had was two weeks ago,” she said, adding that some of the staff who had needed to self-quarantine are starting to come back to work.

The U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid instituted new reporting requirements for nursing homes that became effective on May 8, which requires them to report their COVID-19 data to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, with the first data set due by 11:59 p.m. on May 17. The CMS anticipates making this data public, to include facility names, the number of suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases, deaths and other information, by the end of May. Once published, this data will be viewable at data.cms.gov by clicking on “special programs/initiatives” and then “COVID-19 Nursing Home Data.”

High caseload in Courtland tied to nursing home?

VDH data says yes, CDC says no

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The Virginia Department of Health and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control appear to be having a difference of opinion as to whether a COVID-19 outbreak at a nursing home is responsible for Courtland's disproportionately high caseload.

As of Tuesday, the VDH is reporting 53 confirmed cases of COVID-19 for Courtland's ZIP code.

That's out of between 4,000 to 5,000 total residents living in and out of the town's incorporated borders, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. Franklin's ZIP code, by comparison, has 44 confirmed cases and a population over three times that of Courtland's.

Of these 53 cases, 47 are among residents and staff at Accordius Health, a long-term care facility that up until April was known as Courtland Health & Rehab. That's according to site-specific outbreak figures the VDH released on Saturday, one day after Gov. Ralph Northam instructed the department to make said data public.

Prior to this, Western Tidewater Health District Director Dr. Todd Wagner had declined on multiple occasions to comment on the number of cases tied to specific facilities. He did, however, concur that Courtland had experienced a relatively large number of cases given its low population density, when contacted by *The Tidewater News* about the matter last week.

For the week ending June 7, however, Accordius reported only four confirmed cases to the U.S.

Centers for Disease Control in accordance with a new rule the U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid adopted in April, which requires each of the nation's more than 15,000 nursing homes to disclose their case totals to the CDC. The CMS made this data public in early June.

Of the four cases Accordius reported to the CDC, one has died, and another three are suspected of having the virus but haven't been tested yet. If Accordius is not the source of Courtland's high numbers, the question remains, what is?

A similar discrepancy occurs in the data reported for another local nursing home, Consulate Health Care of Windsor in Isle of Wight County. That facility reported 63 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and eight COVID-19-related deaths to the CDC for the week ending May 31, and no change for the week ending June 7. Yet the VDH's site-specific data published on Saturday lists only 54 confirmed cases, but the same number of deaths.

Wagner, when asked about the discrepancy in state and federal case totals for these facilities, said the VDH data reports the cumulative number of cases tied to each facility since the pandemic began. The CDC data, on the other hand, is what the facility self-reports to the federal government on a weekly basis. He then referenced a statement published on the VDH website, which reads, "Due to different reporting requirements and case classifications, timelines and other factors, the CMS data will likely be inconsistent with data reported by VDH."

Gina Williams, Accordius' administrator, had previously informed the newspaper that as of the last week in May, the facility had not seen any new positive COVID-19 tests for two weeks. As of that week, the VDH was reporting 49 confirmed cases for the 23837 ZIP code, only three of which were tied to Accordius per data the facility had reported to the CDC as of the week ending May 31. The four total cases Accordius reported to the CDC as of June 7 indicate the facility has seen at least one new confirmed case since the start of the month.

The site-specific VDH data, however, lists the outbreak at Accordius as "pending closure." Outbreaks labeled as such, according to Wagner, are those where at least 28 days have passed without a documented new case. Williams, when contacted on Tuesday, confirmed the Courtland facility had indeed seen one new COVID-19-positive test result on June 4, but could not confirm whether the VDH or CDC cumulative totals were accurate. She added that the facility plans to re-test its residents in July

once the next 28-day period has elapsed.

The VDH continues to report a total of eight outbreaks in its Western Tidewater Health District, which includes all of Southampton County, Isle of Wight County and the cities of Franklin and Suffolk. Five of these — with the term “outbreak” defined as two or more cases — are reported to be at long-term care facilities, with the sixth at a correctional facility *The Tidewater News* identified in April as Deerfield in Capron. The remaining two outbreaks are both tied to congregate facilities, which can refer to apartment complexes, places of employment, churches or other group environments.

Courtland water high in fluoride, lead
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The town of Courtland's drinking water has tested above the federal limit for fluoride and lead. Water samples taken Oct. 21 from each of the town's three wells averaged 4.42 parts per million for fluoride, which exceeds the federal 4 ppm maximum contaminant level.

According to Dixon Tucker, district engineer for the Virginia Department of Health's office of drinking water, the town has a history of naturally high fluoride in its drinking water, and was subject to a state consent order from 2005 through 2014 to reduce its levels. But this is the first year since Courtland began testing its water in 1993 that it's seen lead results in excess of the 15 parts per billion federal limit.

Town-wide, Courtland's water system has measured at 43.5 ppb for lead based on samples taken Sept. 22. According to Tucker, this figure is based on the 90th percentile of samples, meaning the nine highest readings out of 10 samples in Courtland's case. Individual test site results ranged from less than 2 ppb to 81.4 ppb.

Lead, a toxic heavy metal, can enter drinking water when lead-containing plumbing materials corrode. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, exposure to high levels of lead may cause anemia, weakness and damage to the kidneys and brain. It is particularly dangerous to children and pregnant women, as even at low levels, childhood lead exposure can lead to brain and nervous system damage, slowed growth and development, learning and behavior problems and hearing and speech problems. Fluoride overexposure isn't quite so hazardous. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, adults exposed to excessive fluoride levels over a lifetime may have increased likelihood of bone fractures, while children age 8 and younger have an increased chance of developing pits in their tooth enamel, along with a range of cosmetic effects on teeth.

Tucker discussed the lead results with town officials on Oct. 15. For the time being, the only enforcement action the VDH has decided to take is to require Courtland to test its water more frequently — quarterly for fluoride and every six months for lead.

“They may test out of needing to do anything besides monitoring,” Tucker said.

If two six-month sampling events show lead values below the federal maximum, the town will be permitted to reduce its lead testing frequency to once a year. Prior to the most recent test, the town had been testing for lead only once every three years, the least frequent interval allowed by law.

Asked to speculate on why Courtland's lead was suddenly so high, Tucker said in looking at the sample sites it appears several may have been unoccupied dwellings. As such, the sampled water may have been sitting in pipes for weeks or months rather than flowing. If those pipes contained lead, that could account for the high readings, he said.

Currently, Courtland doesn't provide any type of water treatment at either of its two active wells or the third, which is reserved for emergency use.

“The town's team is working closely with the Department of Drinking Water to isolate the source of the results and have plans in place to bring the issues to a positive close,” according to a statement issued via email by the Town of Courtland after a call to the mayor, Danny Williams. “The town continues to comply with all regulations for testing and public notification as required by code.”