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HOLLY KOZELSKY:
CHICKS ENJOY
FALL BEFORE
WINTER'S CHILL
» ACCENT



MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

THE VOICE OF THE COMMUNITY FOR 130 YEARS

Sunday, September 13, 2020 • MARTINSVILLEBULLETIN.COM • Martinsville, Virginia \$2



Prescription Oxycodone pills

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Opioids for sale on the corner

The Federal Drug Administration says there are very strict rules about how drugs — especially opioids — are promoted, but nonetheless, simplistic yard signs offering Suboxone and methadone for \$1 a day are on display across Martinsville.

By Holly Kozelsky
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Maybe you've noticed the signs. They can be seen at intersections as you drive into Martinsville, through town and as you drive out: "Methadone - Suboxone - \$1 a Day" or "Methadone - Suboxone - Medicaid accepted."

Both signs carry the same phone number, although only the \$1-a-day sign features a logo and website address, in small letters on the bottom: ALEF Behavioral.

"Both [methadone and Suboxone] are medications that are used in the treatment of opioid addiction," said Sharon Buckman, the clinical services director at Piedmont Community Services.

The city of Martinsville is one of

SEE **OPIOIDS** | A9



HOLLY KOZELSKY/MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

This sign advertising Methadone and Suboxone for \$1 a day was taken Aug. 24 on Commonwealth Boulevard. Those drugs have street value, said a representative of Piedmont Community Services — and the advertising of that type of drug is very heavily regulated, said a representative of the FDA.

Need help?

» Piedmont Community Services is available to help people with addiction issues.

» You can call 276-632-7128 in Martinsville, 276-694-4361 in Stuart or 540-483-0582 in Rocky Mount.

» Some face-to-face services have resumed, with people wearing masks, and telehealth services also are offered.

Patrick County Public Schools students head to class



SCREENSHOT

The Patrick County School Board met for a comparatively brief and standard meeting Thursday — less than an hour, as compared to the recent well more than two hours for meetings which had considered whether to hold school virtually or in person.

Patrick County Schools ready to begin with slightly fewer in-person students than expected originally.

By Holly Kozelsky
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On Monday, Patrick County students will be the first of local students to return to their classrooms.

The original plan was for families to have the choice of an all virtual or part-week classroom attendance plan. Plans were switched temporarily to all virtual at the start of the school year because an outbreak among teachers left the high school without

enough staff to open the school.

Statistics on student numbers were discussed during the Patrick County Public Schools School Board meeting Thursday in the auditorium of Patrick County High School. That meeting was broadcast over Facebook.

On the 18th day of the school year, enrollment of students in kindergarten through 12th grade was 2,135, Superintendent Dean Gilbert said. The budget for the 2020-21 school

year is based on 2,200.

Assistant Superintendent of Instruction Andrea Cassel said teachers and staff have responded well to the ever-changing plans.

"We're just more impressed than ever with our staff members and the work they have done in this time," Cassel said.

When families were notified at the switch back to the hybrid attendance plan, they had to tell the schools whether their children would take in-person or virtual lessons. One hundred thirty-three students who had been signed up for the hybrid plan switched to all-virtual, she said, and

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WEATHER

Thunderstorm in some areas in the morning, partly cloudy and warm tonight
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80 HIGH | 65 LOW

There were 1,300 new coronavirus cases reported statewide, 10% in Montgomery County.
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Opioids

From Page A1

the nation's worst for opioid addiction. The presence of signs touting those powerful drugs used to replace the addictive painkillers and ease an addict's path to recovery — ultimately linked to a clinic in Eden, N.C. — raised questions about how they came to be there and the propriety of touting cheap paths to medications that Piedmont Community Services says must be taken in conjunction with therapy, peer support and other types of help.

The Bulletin asked the Federal Drug Administration about those signs and received a response from “spokesperson,” who did not provide a name. That spokesperson said the FDA takes promotions for anything having to do with opioids very seriously. The spokesperson said in an email that “the Office of Prescription Drug Promotion proactively flags, monitors and reviews promotional pieces for opioids as one of our highest priorities.”

Those simple yard signs are classified by the FDA as “reminder ads,” which give a medication's name but not its use.

“The assumption behind reminder ads is that the audience knows what the drug is for and does not need to be told,” the section “Reminder Ad (Correct)” states on the FDA's prescription drugs website.

When asked about the \$1/day signs in Martinsville, the spokesperson did not talk about them specifically but responded about drug advertisements in general, including links to parts of the agency's website.

“As a regulatory agency, the FDA is committed to ensuring that prescription drug promotion is truthful, balanced and accurately communicated,” the spokesperson said by email.

Federal law does not prohibit drug companies from advertising any kind of prescription drug, “even ones that can cause severe injury, addiction or withdrawal effects. However, companies cannot use reminder promotion for drugs with certain serious risks (drugs with ‘boxed warnings’),” the spokesperson wrote.

According to the FDA's “Drug Advertising” A Glossary of Terms” on its website, “Boxed warnings” are required in “drugs that have special problems, particularly ones that may lead to death or serious injury.” They are like those lengthy warnings you hear read at the end of ads on television.

Because prescription opioids carry such high risks, the FDA carefully scrutinizes how they are marketed. “The Office of Prescription Drug Promotion proactively flags, monitors and reviews promotional pieces for opioids as one of our highest priorities,” the spokesperson wrote.

The spokesperson sent links to sections of the FDA's website, which provide details about drug advertisements:

“Prescription Drug Advertising Questions and Answers” states that the FDA does not see ads before the public does. If it believes an ad violates the law, “we send a letter to the drug company asking that the ads be stopped right away.”

The review of “promotional pieces for opioids” is one of the roles of the Office of Prescription Drug Promotion, the FDA



A DEA report stated that 242 opioid pain pills were distributed per person in Martinsville between 2006 and 2012.

spokesperson wrote, and considers monitoring and reviewing “promotional pieces for opioids as one of our highest priorities.”

Street value

Last year, Piedmont Community Service helped 1,000 people with substance abuse disorders across its coverage area of Martinsville and the counties of Henry, Patrick and Franklin, Buckman said.

“Both methadone and Suboxone have street value,” Buckman said. “Methadone has the potential for abuse,” although the way to get high off it is “very complicated.”

“Suboxone's street value is primarily because it can help [stop] withdrawal symptoms” from opioid abuse if an abuser “can't get their preferred street drug, to prevent getting sick,” she said.

Buckman said overcoming a drug addiction is much more involved than just taking pills.

“Those require a combination of medication, counseling and care coordination and case management,” she said. “Our program also includes peer support from individuals who have training and education, but also ... experience in recovery.”

“We know that just the pill alone does not usually get results ... in long-term recovery.”

How Suboxone is used

PCS has “office-based opioid treatment in all three of its clinics” at 24 Clay Street in Martinsville, 22280 Jeb Stuart Highway in Stuart and 30 Technology Drive in Rocky Mount.

Suboxone is used to reduce cravings for opioids and ease or prevent withdrawal symptoms caused when someone stops taking opioids, Buckman said.

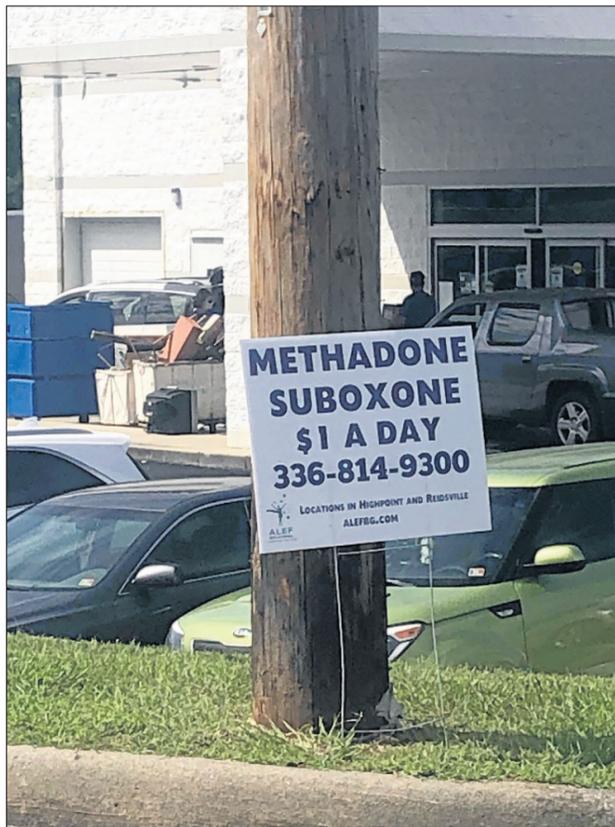
It can be prescribed “by any physician who has completed training by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration,” she said. A doctor who takes the free, 8-hour training is granted certificate from the Drug Enforcement Agency to prescribe it.

Nurse practitioners are able to get that certification if they complete 24 hours of training, she said.

Methadone requires a clinic

Methadone “has to be provided by a specialized clinic,” she said. A person using methadone usually has to take that medication at a clinic under supervision, rather than receiving a supply to keep at home.

“There is a potential for abuse with methadone, which is why people have to be observed



This sign advertising Methadone and Suboxone for \$1 a day was taken Sept. 5 on Commonwealth Boulevard. Those drugs have street value, said a representative of Piedmont Community Services, and the advertising of that type of drug is very heavily regulated, said a representative of the FDA.

taking it initially,” she said.

“Methadone clinics operate in the early hours of the morning,” she said. “Family members have to take the person in at 5 p.m. to get their doses. They have to go every day,” until “eventually they get a week's worth of medications at a time” to take on their own, at home.

Opioid addiction problems are treated with multiple tactics including, as appropriate, licensed and certified counselors, care coordinators “to help people get access to basic needs,” including a primary physician, transportation and housing, peer supporters and Suboxone.

Recovery time from an opioid addiction varies greatly, she said. The goal of the first 90 days of treatment is “to give people the tools they need, and especially the road map to stay in recovery.”

Some people consider recovery from opioid addiction to be a lifelong process, she said.

“Some clinics try to taper people off Suboxone after a year,” she said. “Other prescribers feel if it helps someone to avoid relapse, it's OK to use the medication indefinitely.”

A new clinic

Buckman said she had not seen the ads promoting the \$1 Suboxone and methadone, but

that could be because she does not live in the city and has not been out as much as normal because of the pandemic restrictions. She said she has noticed other lawn signs for a different clinic, Spero Health, which recently opened a clinic in Martinsville and has many signs close to the ALEF signs.

“I did some research” on Spero Health, she said. “It appears to me that they have a track record nationally for putting in place the right services to help someone toward the right recovery. I was happy to see that.”

Buckman said another “national provider” was looking to open an office in Martinsville. That group talked “about the combination, the medication but also the counseling and peer support,” she said.

ALEF Behavioral Health Group

ALEF Behavioral Health Group's website calls the company “a fully-accredited, evidence-based opioid addiction treatment center” that “employs the best mind, body and spirit elements in our addiction treatment.” It says it is fully certified by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and is “duly registered” with the Drug Enforcement Administra-

tion.

It has a clinic in Eden, N.C., and, “coming soon,” clinics in Chapel Hill, N.C.; Dare County, N.C., High Point, N.C., Lauren's County, Ga., Myrtle Beach, S.C., and Pulaski County, Ga., according to its website.

When asked in a telephone conversation about the \$1/day promotion, ALEF Behavioral therapist Orlando Paz said, “That was a program we had, and we were helping out the community with it, mostly because of when the COVID stuff came in, a lot of people were having a rough time. We dropped it down to 30 days — the price of the prescription went down to \$30 for 30 days.”

In comparison, GoodRx.com lists various price options for Suboxone tablets, with the lowest being \$35 for 28 days, and for methadone, \$9 for 60 10mg tablets.

The \$1-a-day promotion at ALEF Behavioral “included your counselor, your intake, no hidden fees, no doctor fees,” Paz said. “Some places you go you have a doctor fee, pay for a prescription and also have to pay for a doctor's visit.”

In an interview with John Joyce of Triad Business Journal, ALEF Behavioral Group President and CEO Ronald Flack Jr. said that ALEF Behavioral operates “on a self-pay model” and does not accept insurance or Medicare.

Paz said the clinic now accepts Medicaid.

When asked about the \$1/day signs, Paz said, “We have taken those signs down pretty much and put up new signs that say we accept Medicaid. If you come in and are still struggling, for the first 30 days we go on and off: week on, week off at \$1 a day.”

After that, he did not answer any more questions, saying his is not authorized to speak to the press.

A community in crisis

Southern Virginia long has been recognized as having among the nation's worst problems for opioid misuse and addiction.

Two doctors who had clinics in Martinsville, Vincent K. Jones and Joel Smithers, were under federal investigation for improperly prescribing opioids. Smithers was sentenced to 40 years in prison and fined in October, and Jones committed suicide last fall.

The city of Martinsville had the nation's second-highest-per-capita rate for the most opioid pain pills prescribed between 2006 and 2012, based on information in a database maintained by the DEA. That report said 242 pills per person were distributed in Martinsville, exceeded in rate only by another Virginia city — Norton, with 306 pills per person.

“The FDA is committed to ongoing efforts to address this tragic crisis and supports broader initiatives including regulatory, educational, scientific, and collaborative activities from a range of stakeholders,” the FDA spokesperson wrote in the email. “We have maintained that industry has a very important role to play here and we urge companies — from drug manufacturers, to payors and pharmacies — to not only comply with the law and what is required, but ask themselves what more they can be doing to help reverse this public health crisis of abuse, addiction and death from overdose.”

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

Schools

From Page A1

83 who had previously selected virtual switched to the hybrid plan.

Previously, 72% of students had been expected to attend by the hybrid model and 28% virtually.

For this school year, there were applications for 138 students to be home-schooled, an in-

crease from the 112 last year, Cassel said. Of those, the home-school applications for 21 have not yet been completed.

Seventeen students have transferred to Trinity Christian School, she reported.

A little more than 1,000 breakfasts and lunches were delivered to Patrick County students each day during the time period of virtual instruction. Meals for 316 students will be

picked up for students once school resumes under the hybrid plan, according to a survey.

Gilbert said that students will be required to wear masks when they are close to each other, such as on school buses, but not all day long. Schools will “make sure teachers give mask breaks for students where they can keep the distance.”

He said, “We don't expect students to wear

masks from the time they get off the bus at 7 in the morning until the time they get off the bus at 4 o'clock.”

Also during the meeting, a recommendation was made to table approval of a to-be-created African-American Studies class until the curriculum for that is developed.

It was announced that the state department of education is developing a class in African-American

studies, but the curriculum has not been completed.

Patrick County High School Principal Kenneth Cox said Carol, Henry and Franklin Counties were receiving the pilot version of the class, and Patrick County High School wants also to offer the class “to be ahead of the game.”

The board voted to continue withholding FICA taxes as scheduled from employees' paychecks.

That is in relation to new rules that the FICA taxes may be forgiven in future. It was recommended to continue with the withholding because if it stopped, and then those taxes were not forgiven, employees would be liable for paying it all back.

The school board went into closed session but did not take action afterward.

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



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MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

THE VOICE OF THE COMMUNITY FOR 130 YEARS

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

Water rose in a flash

Deluge leads to flooding, state of emergency in Henry County.

By Holly Kozelsky
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Flash flooding Friday morning resulted in evacuations from vehicles and houses between Bassett Forks and Oak Level and around Draper's Florist on U.S. 220.

Other areas of the county, particularly around Collinsville, also were submerged.

"It ended up overtaking several cars, and a couple of houses" got water in them, Henry County Public Safety Director Matt Tatum said.

There was "a lot of water, and fortunately it went back down as quickly as it came up."

The Bassett Volunteer Rescue Squad, Bassett Volunteer Fire Department and Ridge-way Volunteer Rescue Squad responded to the Bassett Forks area with water rescue equipment and boats, Tatum said.

"They did get one family out of the house using boats," and everyone else they helped was able to make his or her own way out of the flood.

It was the first big, dramatic rescue since new training and equipment in June, funded by The Harvest Foundation, he said.

The entire region is under a flash flood watch from the National Weather Service in Blacksburg which is to continue through to-night. About two to four inches of rain is forecast.

Ann Crenshaw was going to a doctor's ap-

pointment in Roanoke, driven there by her son, Bradley Crenshaw. Their trip north and then again south on U.S. 220 perfectly sandwiched the worst of the flooding.

At about 7 a.m. they hit the 220 Business "turnoff going to Roanoke at Bassett Forks. I mean the bottom just dropped out," she said. "We could only drive like 40 miles per hour it was raining so hard."

The rain "hit the windshield so hard it was almost like it was going to break the windshield out," she said. "It was rolling down the sides of the road into the culvert like a river, just that quick."

By the time they got about five miles outside Rocky Mount, "there was almost no rain," she said.

That northbound road toward Roanoke



COURTESY MISSY SURRETT

Missy Surratt of Bassett Forks just had to run out for a bit in the morning, then couldn't get back into her Hillcrest Park neighborhood, behind the Dodge Store off U.S. 220 — the bridge was flooded.

SEE FLOOD | A10

'I sign up for this'

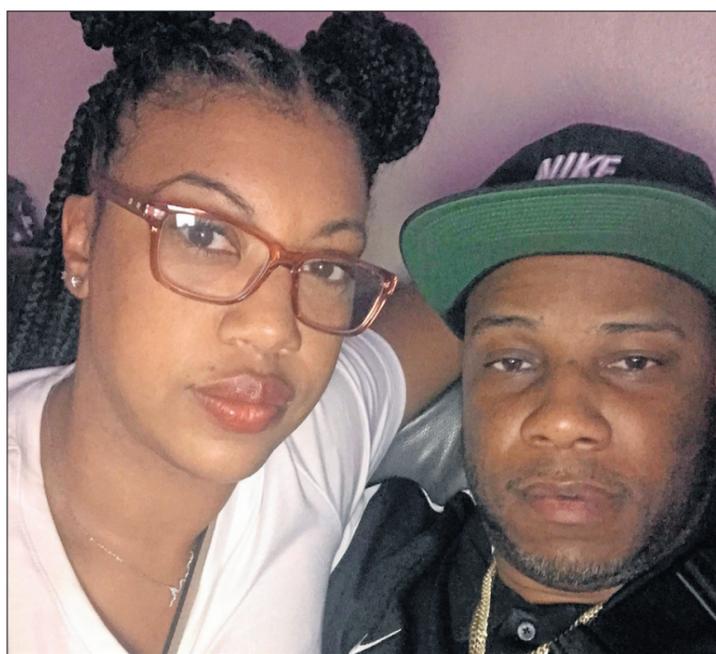


PHOTO SUBMITTED

Tova Yellock is quarantined in her bedroom with COVID-19, while her husband, Johnny Yellock, is taking care of her, their two toddlers and the house.

She's a nurse on the front lines. She has Lupus. She also has COVID-19. She has no regrets.

By Holly Kozelsky
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Nurse Tova Yellock says that even though she has COVID-19, she still doesn't regret her role on the front line of health care.

"I'm a health care worker, so I sign up for this," she said. "I signed up to be on the front lines, and I just ended up getting it [COVID-19]."

COVID-19 "is not a joke. It's not a

game, especially if you have underlying issues. Wash your hands frequently, and wear a mask."

Yellock, 35, has been a nurse for six years. She has worked in various places, often unhappy with conditions she has seen, but in the past half a year has worked at a skilled nursing facility she loves.

On Friday, Aug. 7, "I knew I was sick. I just hadn't got all the way sick yet,"

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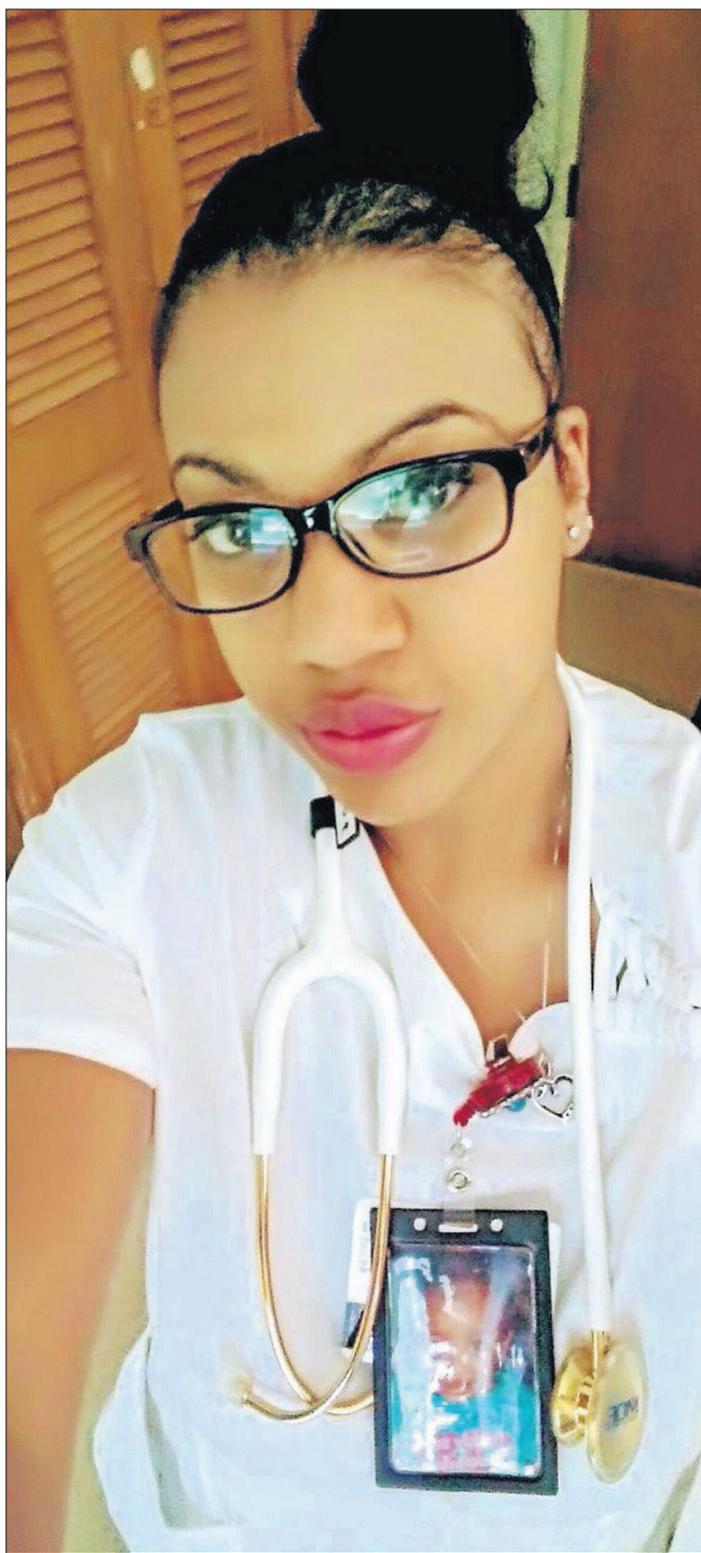


PHOTO SUBMITTED

Nurse Tova Yellock now is suffering at home with COVID-19, but still says she does not regret her work on the front line of health care.

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WEATHER

Partly sunny with a stray thunderstorm, partly cloudy and humid.
For detailed weather information, see Page A2

85 HIGH 67 LOW

There was one more COVID-19 death of a Henry County resident revealed on Friday.
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FLOOD

From Page A1

was the lower road. Around 10 or 10:30 a.m. they returned on the southbound lanes – the higher road.

When they got two and a half or three miles before Bassett Forks, “traffic just stopped. We sat there for quite a while,” she said.

“Cars were coming toward us in the grass, going the wrong way, going the opposite direction,” Crenshaw said.

She called the Virginia State Police, who told her that “they were aware.”

After about an hour stalled, their lanes of traffic – the southbound, higher up the hill – began moving again. “Debris and gravel and everything had washed across the roads,” she said.

As the pair made their way toward Bassett Forks, they saw complete flooding to their left, the northbound lane – with just the top of a white van, or perhaps a double-cab pickup truck, poking out of the top of the water.

“You hear about flash flooding. All I could think when I went through there was that it must happen so quickly. You know it could be coming, but all of a sudden it’s just on top of you,” she said.

“I guess because it just rushes so fast, it’s almost like a small tidal wave,” she said.

Meanwhile, Missy Surratt was stranded outside her Hillcrest Park neighborhood behind Dodge Store in Bassett Forks at around that same time.

“I had to run out this morning, and by the time I returned the entire area was flooded,” she said.

A neighbor who has lived there for 30 years told her he’s never seen anything like that, she said.

The neighborhood just has one way in and out, and “many others beside myself will not be able to return until the rain stops and the waters recede,” she said.

Surratt waited to return home until around noon when Jessica Smith Hartsock had “sent out notice that the bridge is clear.”

Rebecca Carlson was at work



Missy Surratt of the Hillcrest Park neighborhood in Bassett Forks took this picture of the grounds at Stanleytown Elementary School. She had run out for what she intended to be a brief spell Friday morning, then couldn't get back into her neighborhood because of flooding.

COURTESY PHOTO/MISSY SURRATT

at the Speedway convenience store, across from Dodge's, when the waters rose rapidly.

She took a video, which received 7,000 views in just a couple of hours.

“Very bad, people!” she said. The grounds in front of Stanleytown Health and Rehab were completely flooded, a daytime version of a nighttime scene that had occurred there in May.

Joanna and Tony Oakes saw flooding at the bridge on Figsboro Road just a few hundred feet from the Kings Mountain Road intersection. A truck parked just before the flooded area was making other vehicles turn back, she said. The road

Joanna Oakes was safe at home on Figsboro Road when she saw the bridge flooded, and a truck diverting traffic away from it, around noon Friday.

COURTESY PHOTO/JOANNA OAKES



and bridge seemed to be clear a little before 1 p.m., with traffic moving again, she said.

Jennifer DeLong also warned of flooding in that area, a mile or two closer to Business 220, behind the bakery.

“Significant Flooding occurring in Henry County,” the county posted in warning to the media by email at 10:40 a.m. Friday. “Please be cautious and stay off of the roads if possible. Please do not drive through

floodwaters — turn around, don't drown.”

The county issued a state of emergency because of flooding.

Henry County Deputy Administrator Dale Wagoner wrote in the email, “There is significant flooding in Henry County, and many roadways are blocked.

“This is an active emergency, and residents are encouraged to stay off the roads.”

The declaration helps first responders to coordinate the various resources that may be needed to respond and recover from the flooding, he wrote.

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

COVID-19

From Page A1

she said. She stopped working immediately.

She only felt like she was “coming down with a cold or something,” but there was cause for concern: not just from the coronavirus pandemic, but also from the fact that she has lupus.

Lupus “is an autoimmune disorder that affects your joints,” she said. She also has fibromyalgia, which causes pain.

Over the weekend, “I had the general malaise just because of my underlying illnesses,” she said.

On Aug. 11, she went to the hospital, where she was tested for the flu, strep and the coronavirus.

The coronavirus test came back positive on Aug. 13.

“I have breathing problems. That's the main thing about it with me. Because of my health issues, the breathing is horrible,” she said.

She is on oxygen therapy, with oxygen at home to help her breath more deeply when she needs it. There was a point she was using it quite a bit, and she has been cutting back lately.

She hasn't had much coughing, but she has “chills. I break out in sweats.”

The body aches are unbelievable, like being stabbed with ice picks, she said.

“One day I wake up and I'll feel normal, then 2, 3 hours later – boom, I'm sick again,” she said. “It's weird like that. It's the weirdest virus I've ever had in my life. It's the craziest thing.”

She can't taste or smell anything, but she feels the textures of food while she eats, she said.

“I've been scared this whole time,” she said. “Especially earlier in the week I was scared. I couldn't breathe good, couldn't smell, was dizzy, had no coordination, was falling.”

Someone sick with COVID-19 needs regular help with the most basic of functions, she said. “You cannot do this alone.” She is being well taken care of by her husband, Johnny Yellock, she said.



PHOTO SUBMITTED

The Yellock family includes (back, from left) Tova Yellock; her mother-in-law, Brenda Yellock; her husband, Johnny Yellock; and daughters Kailyn Yellock and Milan Waller. Now Tova Yellock is in quarantine with COVID-19, and Johnny Yellock is taking care of her and everything at home.

As well as tending to her needs, he is doing all the parenting for their two daughters, 2-year-old Kailyn Yellock and 4-year-old Milan Waller.

By maintaining a strict quarantine in her bedroom, she has kept the virus from the rest of the family, she said.

She mostly stays in the couple's bedroom, while her husband sleeps on the

other end of the house. She constantly wears a mask, and she wipes down anything she touches with bleach wipes.

“That's how I am keeping my family safe – along with my amazing husband,” she said.

One of her friends, Michelle George, created a Facebook fundraiser for her. “People wanted to help me in some

way,” Yellock said.

The fundraiser is titled “Tova Yellock COVID 19 Fundraiser.”

“My sweet friend Tova Yellock has COVID 19,” the fundraiser description reads.

“She is a hard working nurse. She loves her job and her residents so much. She has a wonderful family as well.

“If you can imagine having COVID is scary. She is very sick at home on oxygen therapy. She is in need of donations.

“If you do not feel comfortable donating money then please consider buy gift cards to grocery stores. Even Walmart gift cards. ...

“Listen, she has been front lines since Day One of this. Never taking off. Please consider helping her. At least share this fundraiser. Thank you so much!” The fundraising goal was a modest \$300.

“I'm not trying to be that person that's just wanting more and more and more, whether I need it or not. I'm not that person,” Yellock said.

That \$300 would have been around the amount to cover about a week without a paycheck. However, Yellock since has learned that she'll miss more work than that.

She's receiving some financial assistance while she's not working, she said, but it won't cover the all the time with no paycheck – even though bills and expenses still keep coming in.

Yellock said she is sharing her story because she warns people to take this disease seriously.

“The COVID can affect your whole family,” she said. “Wear your mask. Be careful.”

However, as medical experts say, wearing a mask is more for the protection of other people around than it is for the mask-wearer: “I wore my mask every day ... and still ended up contracting the virus,” she said.

“With that being said, it's important for everyone including yourself to wear a mask, to keep one another safe as well. A person who is not wearing a mask can give it to someone who is wearing a mask.”

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



**ELECTION 2020:
MARTINSVILLE
CITY COUNCIL
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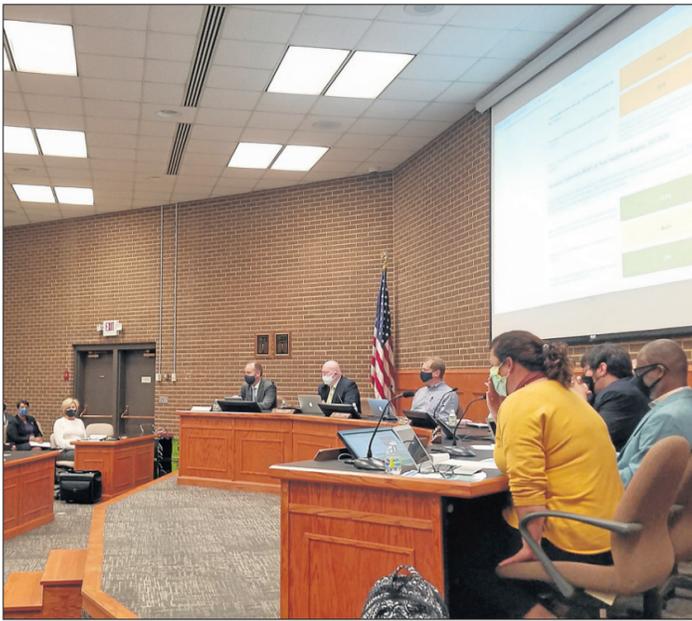


**SPEEDWAY:
CLAY CAMPBELL
TALKS 2021
SCHEDULE » SPORTS**

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

THE VOICE OF THE COMMUNITY FOR 130 YEARS

Sunday, October 4, 2020 • MARTINSVILLEBULLETIN.COM • Martinsville, Virginia \$2



Teachers, data don't sway board

Despite pleas from several teachers about various factors involving the coronavirus, the Henry County School Board's plan to reopen on Oct. 12 remains in place.

By Kim Barto Meeks
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The Henry County School Board is sticking by its decision to resume in-person classes on a limited basis starting Oct. 12, even as teachers once again turned out in force at Thursday

night's monthly school board meeting in opposition to the plan.

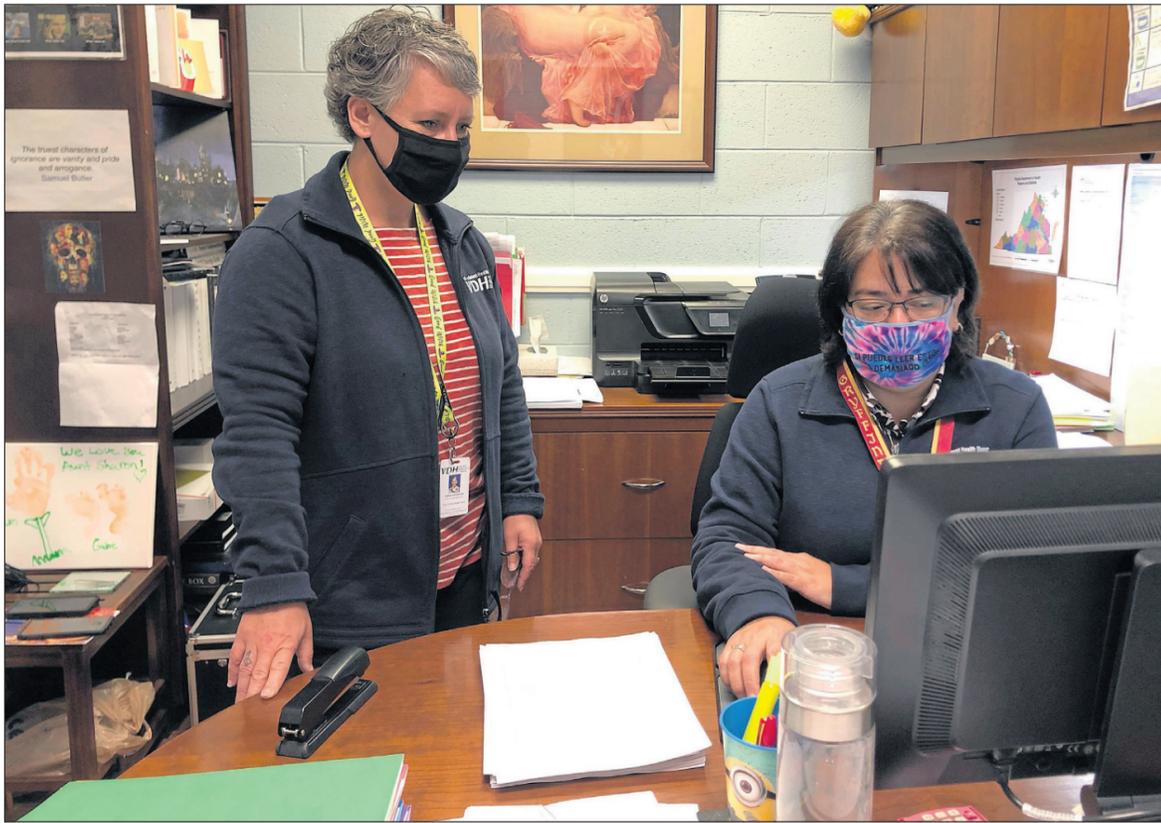
Several teachers and representatives of the Henry County Education Association addressed the board with concerns about students' returning to school on the hybrid schedule. Many of their colleagues sat in the socially distanced audience and applauded in solidarity.

The scene was similar to the school board's heavily attended special meeting the week before. On Sept. 24, the board voted, 5-2, to move from fully remote instruction to the hybrid plan, with masks required indoors for all students and staff.

SEE BOARD | A10

KIM BARTO MEEKS/MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN/
Superintendent Sandy Strayer (seated at left) discusses new COVID-19 community risk metrics at Thursday night's regular monthly meeting of the Henry County School Board.

The disease detective



HOLLY KOZELSKY/MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN
Virginia Department of Health local epidemiologist Sharon Ortiz-Garcia (seated) looks at the morning's list of new coronavirus cases in the West Piedmont Health District with Nurse Caren Rodgers. Then she will prepare the report that will show in the next morning's statistics from the VDH, and start the contact-tracing process.

Meet Sharon Ortiz-Garcia, the epidemiologist in the area who traces "the when, the what and the how, and where" of the coronavirus' travels. Like is going on in Washington right now.

By Holly Kozelsky
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Since the first positive coronavirus case hit the West Piedmont Health District on March 20, a detective of sorts has been on the case, assigned to trace every element of how the virus came to find that individual and how it might be spreading in the area.

Sharon Ortiz-Garcia is by training epidemiologist, an expert in contagions, but more effectively you can consider her the leading inves-

tigator of the spread of COVID-19 in Martinsville and Henry, Patrick, and Franklin counties, which comprise the West Piedmont Health District. This has become no small task.

In a typical day, she receives reports of all new COVID-positive patients in the district, and her job is to follow up with every one of them, offering instructions for quarantine, managing the illness and — perhaps most importantly — obtaining

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Three more deaths in health district

Three more residents of the West Piedmont Health District have died from COVID-19. That's now 76 since the pandemic began in March. There were also 52 new cases on Saturday as reported by the Virginia Department of Health.

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Trump 'looking better'

President said to be improving, but next 48 hours 'critical'.

By Jonathan Lemire,
Jill Colvin and Zeke Miller
The Associated Press

BETHESDA, Md. — President Donald Trump went through a "very concerning" period Friday and faces a "critical" next two days in his fight against COVID-19 at a military hospital, his chief of staff said Saturday — in contrast to a rosier assessment moments earlier by Trump doctors, who took pains not to reveal the president had received supplemental oxygen at the White House before his hospital admission.

"We're still not on a clear path yet to a full recovery," White House chief of staff Mark Meadows said outside the Walter Reed

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THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
Dr. Sean Conley, physician to President Donald Trump, briefs reporters at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., on Saturday.

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WEATHER

Intervals of sun and clouds, turning mostly cloudy into the evening.
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Trump

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National Military Medical Center.

The changing, and at times contradictory accounts, created a credibility crisis for the White House at a crucial moment, with the president's health and the nation's leadership on the line. With Trump ex-

pected to remain hospitalized several more days and the presidential election looming, his condition is being anxiously watched by Americans.

Moreover, the president's health represents a national security issue of paramount importance not only to the functions of the U.S. government but to countries around the world, friendly and otherwise.

Saturday's briefing by

Navy Commander Dr. Sean Conley and other doctors raised more questions than it answered. Conley repeatedly refused to say whether the president ever needed supplemental oxygen, despite repeated questioning, and declined to share key details including how high a fever Trump had been running before it came back down to a normal range. Conley also revealed that Trump had begun exhibit-

ing "clinical indications" of COVID-19 on Thursday afternoon, earlier than previously known. Conley spent much of the briefing dodging reporters' questions, as he was pressed for details.

"Thursday no oxygen. None at this moment. And yesterday with the team, while we were all here, he was not on oxygen," Conley said.

But according to a person familiar with Trump's con-

dition, Trump was administered oxygen at the White House on Friday morning, well before he was transported to the military hospital by helicopter that evening. The person was not authorized to speak publicly and spoke to The Associated Press only on condition of anonymity.

Conley said that Trump's symptoms, including a mild cough, nasal congestion and fatigue "are now resolv-

ing and improving," and said the president had been fever-free for 24 hours. But Trump also is taking aspirin, which lowers body temperature and could mask or mitigate that symptom.

"He's in exceptionally good spirits," said another doctor, Sean Dooley, who said Trump's heart, kidney, and liver functions were normal and that he was not having trouble breathing or walking around.

Board

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School board members took no action Thursday to amend their previous vote. However, discussion of the return to school plan dominated much of the meeting's agenda.

Under the hybrid plan, students would attend classes in-person two days a week and learn remotely the other three days. Parents can also choose to have their children continue 100% virtual classes.

Virtual learning "will have the same quality as in-person learning," Superintendent Sandy Strayer told the board.

Strayer said families would be contacted Friday with their child's schedule. They will have until Tuesday to change their learning preference.

Some already have switched their children from in-person to remote learning since the school board announced Oct. 12 as the start of the hybrid plan. At the special school board meeting Sept. 24, Strayer said survey results showed 3,530 students had chosen in-person, and 1,466 students planned to stay virtual.

By Thursday night, however, "we are fastly approaching almost 2,000 virtual learners," Strayer said.

In terms of total student population, "we're not quite at 7,000 any more, so we have 5,000 divided by half coming every day to the schools. There could be more students choosing virtual once they see the options that they have," she said.

Weighing the risks

Strayer defended the decision to bring students back to school buildings in the face of new COVID-19 metrics released Monday by the Virginia Department of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

On the day of the meeting, the VDH dashboard placed Henry County in the second-highest risk category, "higher risk," for community spread of the virus.

"We did investigate the new metric to determine if we need to reconsider our opening for October 12, and at this time I do feel we should continue our return to school plan on October 12," Strayer told the board.

She added that school officials have been constantly monitoring local COVID-19 numbers for months. "You cannot look at one indicator in isolation," she said.

The VDH/CDC metrics rate COVID-19 risk levels for individual cities and counties in Virginia on a scale of lowest risk, lower risk, moderate risk, higher risk, and highest risk. This assessment is mainly based on two statistics known as "core indicators": the number of new cases per 100,000 persons in the past 14 days and percentage of positive tests during the same time period.

As of Thursday, Henry County had 192.3 new cases per 100,000 and 9.7% positive tests within the past 14 days. These numbers appeared orange on the online dashboard, meaning they are in the higher risk category.

The CDC recommends using these main indicators, as well as considering the school's ability to implement key health guidelines such as "consistent and correct use of masks, social distancing to the extent possible, hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette, cleaning and disinfection, and contact tracing in collaboration with local health department."

During the meeting, Strayer showed the online dashboard to board members but emphasized the positive trends in

some of the other figures.

"The trend is the most important piece," she said. "We are declining in percent change in new cases per 100,000 population during the past seven days compared with the previous seven days."

This rate was -11.5% as of Thursday, and it appeared green on the VDH dashboard, meaning "lowest risk."

However, this number is a "secondary indicator," not one of the "core indicators" on the CDC scale. The website states, "These secondary indicators should not be used as the main criteria for determining the risk of disease transmission in schools. They should be used to support decision-making derived from the core indicators."

Strayer said she wanted to restate a point she made at the previous meeting, telling the board, "We have had cases of COVID-19 in our schools, and we most likely will continue to have cases. The point is to stop cases from spreading."

Questions about safety

Bassett High School teacher Kathryn Adkins pointed to the CDC's numbers as a sign that it's not safe for students to return. She was one of six teachers to address the board during the public comment period.

Adkins, who serves as vice president of the Henry County Education Association, urged the board to set a policy "in which students do not return to the building until the rate of new cases reaches a moderate risk level of less than 50 cases."

Another speaker, Career Academy teacher and HCEA representative Jerry Byrd, said many teachers are worried about cleaning and sanitation taking place in school buildings.

"Teachers are scared," Byrd said. "We need to make sure teachers feel safe in their buildings. They don't feel that way right now."

Amanda Johnson, the librarian at Meadow View Elementary School, said she is concerned about the potential spread of the virus as she teaches and interacts with more than 600 students.

"Knowing that I can't visit my mother who is dying of cancer without being the one to put her in the ground sooner is weighing on me," Johnson said. "It is time to re-evaluate our current plan, as the number of cases in Henry County is still alarming."

Melanie Reynolds, an English teacher at Bassett High School and mother of two county students, said she is "a proud breast cancer survivor."

"I love my students. Like every other teacher in this county, I want them in my classroom more than you could ever imagine," Reynolds said. "As teachers, we give everything we have to our kids. But there are many of us at high risk of catching this virus, and we have students at risk as well."

Heather Byrd spoke as a teacher, parent, and HCEA representative about the "overwhelming" expectations for school employees under the hybrid plan.

"Staff members are expected to be in two places at one time," Byrd said.

For example, at the high school level, teachers are expected to monitor the hallways as students change classes while also sanitizing all the desks between class periods. "That is not possible," she said.

Rushed decision?

Byrd also spoke about the health and safety of bus drivers. One driver is "very concerned about temperature checks not occurring before

children get on the bus, which means they're going to be transporting sick children, possibly COVID students on the bus," she said.

Drivers are also concerned about "the impossibility of making sure children keep masks on while riding the bus" and "keeping children separated" to meet social distancing guidelines, she said.

Melanie Eggleston, a teacher at Campbell Court Elementary School, said, "I feel as though the decision to begin the hybrid schedule was rushed into."

Eggleston suggested the board look at dedicating some teachers to virtual instruction and others to teaching in-person, instead of asking teachers to do both. Or, shortening the school day would be another option to give teachers time for planning, collaboration and working with virtual learners.

Under the current plan, "we simply don't have enough hours in our current schedule to adequately and equitably educate all learners," she said.

Parent Myndi Mullins said she has three children in the county schools, in kindergarten, second and third grades. She praised her children's teachers for being available during virtual learning.

"Unless my teachers are in a meeting, within five minutes, they're there," Mullins said. "They're on it, paying one-on-one attention."

However, she questioned how teachers will juggle all of their responsibilities during the hybrid schedule.

"My teachers are tired. They have been there for us since day one," Mullins told the board. "You're putting too much on their shoulders with hybrid."

Finding answers

School Board members Benjamin Gravely and Teddy Martin II were the only two to vote against returning on the hybrid plan Oct. 12.

On Thursday, Martin cautioned against deciding to take risks based on daily figures from the VDH.

"You cannot count on the VDH day-by-day statistics because if you did, you'd have the impression it's just like Chick-fil-A — you can't get it on a Sunday," he said. "These statistics are lagging indicators."

Martin also expressed concerns about hospitals' having enough capacity once they are faced with both flu season and COVID-19.

"Just like on 'Game of Thrones,' winter is coming," he said.

He also asked Strayer how school officials plan to respond to teacher and frontline staff who have "come here with very real concerns. ...The last thing I want to happen is for people to take the time to come here and feel like we did not listen to what they have to say."

Strayer said she has been taking notes on all the teacher comments and plans to work on a response to go out.

"Every question that's brought up, we want to address. We want to make sure principals meet with their staff and reassure them," she said.

Strayer noted there is a Frequently Asked Questions page on the Henry County Public Schools website. Many of the questions from parents, students and staff can also be answered by the district's COVID-19 instruction plan and health plan for returning to school, which have been posted online since July at www.henry.k12.va.us.

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Virus

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the names and contact information for anyone who has been in "close contact" with the infected person.

"It has been non-stop seven days a week," she said.

As many experts today are trying to trace the outbreak of the virus that has infected President Trump, his wife, Melania, and various others in government, they are turning to experts such as Ortiz-Garcia.

In the beginning, Ortiz-Garcia did this by herself. But as the numbers of cases grew, nurse Caren Rodgers began helping, and then many of the staff of the health departments in the West Piedmont District were trained to assist with the effort. Now, nearly two dozen people have been hired in the district to help manage the pandemic and minimize further spread beyond the more than 2,100 individuals who already have been infected. The work goes on seven days a week.

On a district level, Ortiz-Garcia said, epidemiologists "are basically considered the experts of controlling and preventing communicable diseases ... that have to be reported by health care providers and other entities."

That is achieved by her determining "the when, the what and the how, and where" infected people have been, she said. "My job, working with the community at large, is to make sure we have prevention and control measures."

Those measures are the best that can be done to protect people, Ortiz-Garcia said, "until we can find a vaccine."

Tracking the suspects

The additional personnel are serving mostly as contact tracers and case managers. Coronavirus tracking begins as soon as the health department receives notices of positive cases from health care providers, testing centers and other entities.

"We start assigning the cases to the contracted case investigators that we have now," Ortiz-Garcia said. Those case investigators, generally, manage several contact tracers. The tracers are charged with reaching out to every person who is considered a close contact. The investigators also ask the patient what he/she has done over the 14-day period before they tested positive. This includes who the patient has been around and where the patient has traveled.

"One of the main critical questions is when the symptoms started," Ortiz-Garcia said. That's because contact tracing begins with identifying people the patient had been in contact with during those two days before the onset of the symptoms, not the entire 14 days. The contact tracer tells those people that they had been near someone with the coronavirus.

The need to know with whom the patient had been in contact with during those two weeks before the positive test results is to figure out where the patient may have caught it, she said.

Anyone who has tested positive for the coronavirus, whether they develop COVID-19 symptoms or not, must remain isolated until the health department releases him or her. The virus can be spread by asymptomatic people as well as those who are visibly sick.

Being in an indoor environment (e.g., store, workplace, restaurant) with someone who has COVID-19 is not necessarily considered having close contact, according to the Virginia Department of Health. A close contact is defined as a person who spends a prolonged period of time (15 minutes) within 6 feet of a person that has been diagnosed with COVID-19 up to 2 days before to their illness onset. Close contact can occur while caring for, living with, visiting, or sharing a health care waiting area or room with someone that has been diagnosed with COVID-19.

Just being in an indoor environment with someone is not necessarily a close contact.

Quarantine versus isolation

A person who has been directed to quarantine or go into isolation should not go into stores, attend church, go to work or be present at social or family gatherings, Ortiz-Garcia said.

Anyone who has tested positive for the coronavirus, whether he or she ends up sick with COVID-19 or not, must remain isolated until the health department releases him or her.

Anyone who has notified that he has been exposed to someone with the coronavirus, on the other hand, has to be in quarantine for 14 days, and can stop being in quarantine after the end of those 14 days if he or she has not developed symptoms, she said.

People in quarantine have to watch and monitor symptoms twice a day, she said.

A person in quarantine must keep apart from others in household, preferably alone in a bedroom with a private bathroom. If that's not possible, he must clean down the bathroom after each use. Meals should be delivered to him outside the bedroom door. In other areas of the house he must wear a mask. He can walk around yard — alone.

A person in isolation, because he or she has tested positive for the coronavirus, has to follow all those restrictions and more. He cannot walk outside the house at all, and inside, must stay in his room.

Ortiz-Garcia explained that sometimes the infected person gets seriously ill with COVID-19. If a trip to the ER is warranted, and transportation is lacking, Ortiz-Garcia said, the proper way to obtain help is to notify the dispatcher or emergency room intake desk that you have tested positive for COVID. This enables essential medical personnel to protect themselves from infection appropriately.

Most people who are told they tested positive for COVID do not want people to know. Case managers, investigators health department and hospital staff are trained to do everything in their power to keep the identity of persons with COVID hidden, she said.

Long service

Being in a small health district is stressful during the pandemic, Ortiz-Garcia said. "It is better now, but when the numbers rise and manpower is low, "that puts a lot of stress on us."

"In the beginning, it was stressful," she said. "We were overwhelmed." The hiring of additional staff has enabled public health workers to ease back into their regular jobs.

Ortiz-Garcia, who is from Puerto Rico, has been an employee of the health department since 2006. She was hired as a food safety inspector before moving into her role as district epidemiologist, and wasted no time jumping right in. Two weeks after she started, a fungal meningitis outbreak hit the area, and it was up to her to investigate it.

Masks and stuff

Even as COVID cases continue to be reported, diseases that district epidemiologists usually deal with include salmonella, various tick-borne diseases and norovirus, as well as outbreaks, but not individual, cases of flu, she said.

Several health districts share the services of one epidemiologist whose specialty is sexually transmitted diseases, she said.

Her advice on protecting self and others against the coronavirus is nothing new, but supremely important: "Wearing a mask is critical. I wear a mask because I want to protect my family and coworkers." Social distancing also is crucial.

The sooner "we come together as a community," she said, "the quicker we put a stop" to the pandemic's reach, and the suffering it causes.

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