

## Weather

Hot and humid today and tomorrow with highs in the mid-90s. Daytime highs Saturday in the low 90s, dropping to the 80s on Sunday.

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# Hospital sounds alarm on Delta

## Medical team treating covid patients who arrive at ER younger, sicker and unvaccinated

By TOM McLAUGHLIN  
News & Record Staff

The Delta variant of COVID-19 is filling up beds at the hospital with patients who arrive younger and sicker than in previous waves of the pandemic, said two members of the Sentara Halifax Regional Hospital medical team on Wednesday.

SHRH Chief Medical Officer Dr. James Priest and Hospitalist Physician Assistant Blake Rogers spoke to reporters Wednesday afternoon to underscore the urgency of the situation, which Rogers said has worsened significantly in the past month.

SHRH went from seeing no cases of COVID-19 in June “to all of a sudden having an abundance of covid patients in our hospital walls,” Rogers said.

Priest urged county residents to get vaccinated and take other steps, such as frequent handwashing and social distancing to stop the spread of the highly contagious Delta variant. Priest called the Delta strain of the virus “far worse than what we saw originally.”

“It is truly devastating when it wreaks havoc on a person’s body,” he said.

The public outreach by SHRH comes as hospitals around Virginia and the country are beginning to fill up with patients suffering severe bouts of COVID-19. Health officials in Arkansas, where only about 43 percent of people are fully inoculated, reported this week that the state has only eight unoccupied ICU beds for its population of 3 million.

The vaccination rate in Halifax stands at 37 percent of the county’s population, according to state health department data.

Rogers, a member of the admissions team at the emergency depart-

ment, said the local ER saw its first new covid case around the middle of July after a dormant period for the virus. “Last week the numbers dramatically increased,” he said.

Average admissions at the hospital run from around eight to 15 patients daily. In recent days, SHRH is admitting two, three, four covid patients per day, Rogers said.

Priest and Rogers said the Delta strain is prone to inflicting scar damage to the lungs, with potential long-term consequences for patients. Because of the severity of breath-

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Priest



Rogers

## HOSPITAL

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ing problems, the medical staff at the hospital is being forced to take emergency measures sooner than in prior phases of the disease.

“This time patients are coming in in such respiratory distress that we have to start with pretty aggressive airway management,” Rogers said.

Another big difference between this latest stage of the pandemic and earlier phases is the typical age of patients. Initially, most of those admitted to the hospital were 60 years old and up. Now the majority of patients are in their 40s and 50s.

“They’re coming in sicker and they’re coming in younger — that’s one of the things I’ve seen over the last several weeks,” said Priest.

He estimated that 95 percent of the hospital’s caseload consists of unvaccinated persons.

Addressing people’s hesitation to get the vaccine in personal terms, Priest noted that he has Guillain-Barre syndrome, a rare disorder in which the body’s immune system attacks the nerves. Because of his condition, Priest said he has chosen in the past not to get the flu vaccine.

COVID-19 is different. “I honestly did not hesitate” to get inoculated with the mRNA vaccine, versions of which are produced by Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech, Priest said. Despite his compromised immune system, any risk that the vaccine would inflame the condition paled in comparison to the dan-

gers of contracting COVID-19, he explained.

“My odds of dying from covid were ten times the chance of me getting the Guillain-Barre,” he said.

While Priest said individuals must make their own decisions on whether or not to get the shots, not getting vaccinated can have serious consequences not only if they get sick, but if the virus spreads to others in their circle.

“I’m trying to protect my wife, my family, and the people around me,” he said.

A relatively small number of people who have been vaccinated have contracted COVID-19. Priest said these “breakthrough cases” account for about 9

percent of the caseload in the U.S., around 10,000 people per day. Although vaccines are very effective, they do not offer bullet-proof protection. However, even in cases where the virus has broken through immune defenses, patients’ symptoms are generally very mild, said Priest.

Priest said his son and daughter-in-law, both of whom are vaccinated, work as physical therapy assistants at a Danville nursing home. Both recently contracted COVID-19 despite getting their shots. Instead of serious illness, both “came down with cold-like symptoms” that subsided within days. The only real consequence was that they spent 10 days at

home before returning to work.

Apart from vaccination, people can do their part to slow the spread of COVID-19 by taking simple steps — frequent handwashing, social distancing, wearing a mask. Priest said handwashing “sounds so simple” but “it’s one of the most effective things we can do to prevent infection.”

As one of Halifax County’s longest-serving physicians, Priest said he has “never seen anything like what we’re seeing here” with the coronavirus pandemic, and now, with the Delta variant. He pointed to the history of the 1918 flu pandemic as a guide for what can happen if the vi-

rus is allowed to persist and develop in more dangerous forms.

The 1918 flu eventually burned itself out, but only after millions of people died.

“The longer you give the virus time to mutate, it will attempt to do so,” Priest said. Immunization robs the virus of potential hosts and cuts down on the chances that new strains will develop that evade vaccine defenses.

Left unchecked, the virus also will eventually go away — after it claims countless lives.

“I think some people like at this and think this is just the flu again. This is much more deadly,” said Priest.

**Weather**

Rainy weather today and Tuesday with daytime highs in the mid 80s. More rain Wednesday with chance of thunderstorms.

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Monday  
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SERVING SOUTH BOSTON AND HALIFAX COUNTY, VIRGINIA SINCE 1869

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## DEATHS

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# Husband and wife die of virus, hours apart

Within days of being admitted to hospital ICU, and less than two weeks after positive tests, couple succumbs to COVID-19

By TOM McLAUGHLIN  
News & Record Staff

On June 7, Bobby and Lynn Burton celebrated their first year together as a couple, having known each other since childhood before falling in love in their 30s. They married in November 2020 and looked forward to spending many happy years at their Scottsburg home.

Less than 12 hours apart Satur-

day and Sunday, they died together in the hospital ICU — Bobby first on Saturday night, followed by Lynn early Sunday morning.

The cause of their deaths was COVID-19.

“This is like a dream that I wish I could wake up from,” said Jennifer Hatcher, who grew up with Lynn in Clover.

She and Melissa Fears, two of Lynn’s closest friends from

childhood, have established a GoFundMe page in the aftermath of the Burtons’ deaths to help the families cope with funeral expenses. The deaths of the husband and wife happened with shocking speed, less than two weeks after they first tested positive for Covid-19. They were admitted to Sentara Halifax Regional Hospital last week, on Tuesday and Thursday, and each died before

the weekend was over.

Bobby Burton, a Huber Engineered Woods employee, volunteer firefighter and former chief of the Scottsburg Volunteer Fire Department, was 36. Lynn Powell Burton, who worked for Southside Behavioral Health and was a dedicated volunteer with the Triangle Volunteer Fire Department, was 37.

“Both of them were real outgoing, lovable and giving,” said

Fears. “They loved camping and the outdoors and fishing and floating down the river. They’d spend their time with family and friends. Lynn was like a sister to us .... We’ve been together since we were all babies. We grew up together.

“It’s just been hard.”

Their deaths come as public health officials and medical pro-

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Lynn and Bobby Burton of Scottsburg

viders warn of the renewed likelihood of serious illness and deaths from the virus, which has mutated into a delta variant that spreads more easily than its previous forms and appears to aggressively attack younger patients. The disease has killed 78 people in Halifax County since the onset of the pandemic last year, according to the Virginia Department of Health.

Last week, two providers at Sentara Halifax Regional Hospital — chief medical officer Dr. James Priest and hospitalist physician assistant Blake Rogers — warned that people run the risk of dying if they do not get vaccinated for COVID-19.

Vaccination had been a source of trepidation and worry for Lynn Burton. In text messages with her friend Jennifer Hatcher, she expressed unease with her options, caught between her fears of the virus and wariness of getting the shots.

“This covid stuff scares me. I haven’t been vaccinated either because that scares me too. My momma and daddy have been vaccinated,” Lynn wrote in one of her text messages. She added, “I’m on the fence. I’m stuck between being afraid of the virus and being afraid of the cure.”

Through Aug. 3 — one day prior to Bobby testing positive for the virus — neither husband nor wife had gotten the shots, Fears confirmed. With the vaccines that have been authorized by the FDA for emergency use, the CDC advises that it takes two weeks after the last shot before a person has full protection from the virus.

Bobby Burton was the first to fall ill. When he went to the doctor on Aug. 4 for treatment of cold symptoms he tested positive. Lynn Burton tested positive days later.

By Tuesday, Aug. 10, Bobby was having such trouble breathing that he and Lynn, who was also sick, went to the hospital emergency room. He was admitted to the hospital and immediately placed in the intensive care unit, while Lynn was sent home, Fears recounted.

Two days later, Lynn’s mother, Alice Powell, discovered her in a severely weakened state. “She was confused and her oxygen level was low, and she couldn’t walk,” said Fears.

That day, Thursday, Aug. 12, Lynn Burton would return to the ER and, this time, she landed in the hospital ICU next to her husband.

“They kept her in the ICU across the hall from Bobby, and it was Saturday; they both took a turn for the worse so they put them both on a ventilator,” said Fears.

The days following their admissions to the hospital ICU brought glimmers of hope, undone by increasingly bleak updates and phone calls. On Friday, Hatcher spoke by phone first to Bobby, then to Lynn. “The crazy thing is, the last time I talked to him was 4:58 on Friday, and he said they were doing a little better,” she said.

Hatcher later spoke to Lynn around 8:50 p.m. that Friday night: “I said, ‘Hang in there; I love you,’ and she said, ‘Thanks, I love you too.’ That’s the last thing I heard from her.”

On Saturday, Hatcher and Fears got a phone call at Mount Laurel Grocery, which they operate together in the Clover area. The caller was Lynn’s mother, Alice Powell, and she relayed the grim news from Sentara HRH pulmonologist Dr. James Witko, who caught up with Mrs. Powell as she was headed to the hospital to see her daughter. “She [said] they put Bobby and Lynn on a vent today, and I couldn’t believe it,” said Fears, recalling the conversation.

By 8 that evening, Mrs. Powell had gotten a second call from the doctor — this time informing her that Bobby had just died and Lynn was not expected to make it. Lynn died Sunday morning around 4:30 a.m., said her friends.

In theGoFundMe page they set up for the families, Melissa Fears and Jennifer Hatcher wrote the following:

“We grew up with Lynn and she was like a sister to us. We never thought we would be doing this but our friends Bobby and Lynn Burton (husband & wife) passed away within hours of each other from the horrible disease covid. Bobby and Lynn were a perfect match. They would both do anything they could to help others and would give you the shirt off of their backs.

“We are trying to raise funds to help both families with final expenses. Any amount is greatly appreciated. If you want to donate and [don’t] want to do it on here, just contact Melissa or Jennifer. If unable to donate please keep the families in your prayers and share this. May God bless you.”

By Sunday at 7 p.m., the campaign had raised \$2,556 towards the \$20,000 goal, with 50 donors in the first 13 hours.

To donate, visit [www.gofundme.com](http://www.gofundme.com) and search for “Final Expenses for Bobby and Lynn Burton.”

Before she tested positive for COVID-19, Lynn Burton had planned on Aug. 7 to start work part-time at Mount Laurel Grocery. It was one more way in which the three women, closest of friends, had looked forward to spending more time together.

“Lynn was the type of person, she was always there for you if you were upset or hurt. She was the glue for everybody, she looked out for everybody,” said Hatcher. “She was the best person in the world.”

# Virus outbreak sickens 140 at Sinai prison

## Infections fuel highest numbers yet for county

COVID-19 has spread to 130 inmates and 10 staff members at Halifax Correctional Center Unit 23, according to the Virginia Department of Corrections, which operates the Sinai-area minimum security prison.

The Unit 23 outbreak is just the latest in series of mass infections inside Virginia prisons, where more than 8,000 offenders and correctional employees have contracted the virus. COVID-19 has claimed the lives of 51 inmates and two corrections department employees since the pandemic began, VADOC reported Sunday on its covid tracking website.

The explosion of cases at Halifax Correctional Center Unit 23 has contributed to a sharp rise in Halifax County's overall caseload in recent days. The number of positive tests for the coronavirus in Halifax County has risen to 1,703, with 47 deaths since March.

Forty people have been hospitalized with the disease



Halifax Correctional Center Unit 23 on Farm Road in the Sinai area

locally, according to the Virginia Department of Health. All VDH figures are current through Sunday.

In the most recent seven-day period, Jan. 11-17, Halifax added 289 cases to its overall covid caseload. VDH reported 116 new cases on Saturday, the county's largest one-day number since the start of the pandemic.

At Unit 23, the sharp rise in the inmate caseload came after the prison conducted a second round of virus testing on Mon-

day, Jan. 11. All inmates and staff had previously been tested on Dec. 3, according to Lisa Kinney, VADOC Director of Communications.

As recently as two weeks ago, the corrections department reported only a small number of cases involving prison staff — a situation that has ballooned into the 130 inmates who have been infected. 129 inmates continue to be housed at facility. One man has been relocated — either transferred to another facility, hospitalized

or released, according to VADOC, which provides no information on its website on the specific status of inmates.

The prison outbreak, first reported by the News & Record Thursday, has been fueled by the difficulty of maintaining social distance inside the facility, where inmates live, work, and sleep in close proximity to one another. One inmate at Unit 23 who detailed conditions there for the N&R, Larry Del Hunt, said another problem is inmates

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## PRISON

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being forced to use worn-out and dirty facemasks because new masks are issued infrequently by VADOC. Hunt said he has tested positive for COVID-19.

"We can't maintain six feet apart, our bunks at most are 18 inches apart," said Hunt in an interview last week from inside the facility.

As of last week, the prison housed 173 inmates in three parts of the 10-acre complex — the Northside and Southside housing units, and inside the Main Building. Correctional Unit 23 is located on 1200 Farm Road, near the county animal shelter.

As recently as Wednesday, prison officials were engaged in a concerted effort to segregate sick inmates from those who were showing no signs of the disease, said Hunt. He said at the time that many inmates were exhibiting only mild signs of illness, akin to having an allergy.

Hunt also faulted Unit 23 for not taking other precautions to stem the spread of COVID-19, such as preventing inmates with possible symptoms from doing kitchen duty. He also said the facility has required inmates to wipe down surface areas with harsh chemicals without providing proper breathing masks or gloves to protect their health.

Kinney, the corrections department spokesperson, said Halifax Correctional Center has followed VADOC's pandemic sanitation plan, and inmates who display covid symptoms are treated promptly, "just you would in any primary care setting," she wrote in a Jan. 13 email. "We can provide many things, including oxygen, on-site. If they require an inpatient level of care, they go to a hospital."

Any inmate who tests positive is "placed in medical isolation to they don't infect others," Kinney added. Statewide, of the 7,996 inmates who have tested positive, the majority has displayed no symptoms. With these inmates, the virus were detected only through the department's point prevalence testing, she said.

Kinney also said VADOC has been careful to make sure inmates and staff are protected against the spread of COVID-19.

"[I]nmates and staff are required to wear appropriate PPE at all times, including medical-grade PPE, such as N-95 masks, when appropriate. Virginia Correctional Enterprises [located inside Unit 23] manufactures both utility face masks and cleaning supplies approved by the EPA for use in combating the coronavirus, so there is no shortage of either in the facilities," she wrote.