

ALERT

LIFE IN A PANDEMIC | THE EARLY DAYS

Life in a pandemic: Two years ago, it all started grinding to a halt in Dan River Region. 'We really had no idea what we were in for.'

Charles Wilborn

Mar 12, 2022

Editor's note

This is the first in a four-part series examining Dan River Region life in the pandemic.

- **SUNDAY:** The early days as daily routines quickly changed.
- **MONDAY:** Lessons learned through early health care struggles.
- **TUESDAY:** Educators become students in a new learning world.
- **WEDNESDAY:** Positive impacts, community bonds emerge.

As far as monumental moments, March 13, 2020, may not stand out as pivotal.

But it will be forever etched in history as the day the pandemic hit home for the Dan River Region.

With each passing hour that day, it became crystal clear the novel coronavirus had infiltrated daily routines. Community events were canceled in sweeping fashion as life virtually came to a standstill.

Then came the ultimate shock. Delivered via news release at about 2 p.m. that day, Gov. Ralph Northam ordered all Virginia schools closed for two weeks. In itself it would have marked the longest shuttering even compared with lingering impacts from a crippling snowstorm in the South.

At the time, even health experts couldn't fathom the fallout of COVID-19 would linger as long as it has.

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“We really had no idea what we were in for with the novel virus,” Dr. Scott Spillmann, director of the Pittsylvania-Danville Health District, told the Register & Bee last week. “While we knew there would be certain problems along the way, we didn’t think it would last more than a few months, especially past the cold weather.”

The two-year anniversary is marked with harsh realities. Some 24,707 cases of the illness caused by the coronavirus officially have been reported in Danville and Pittsylvania County. The true number is undoubtedly higher.

A total of 450 residents — family members, friends, neighbors and co-workers — have died at the hands of COVID-19.

When it all started, the economic impact dwarfed the implications to health and daily lives. After all, the precautions were put in place before any infections started swirling in the region.

That soon changed.

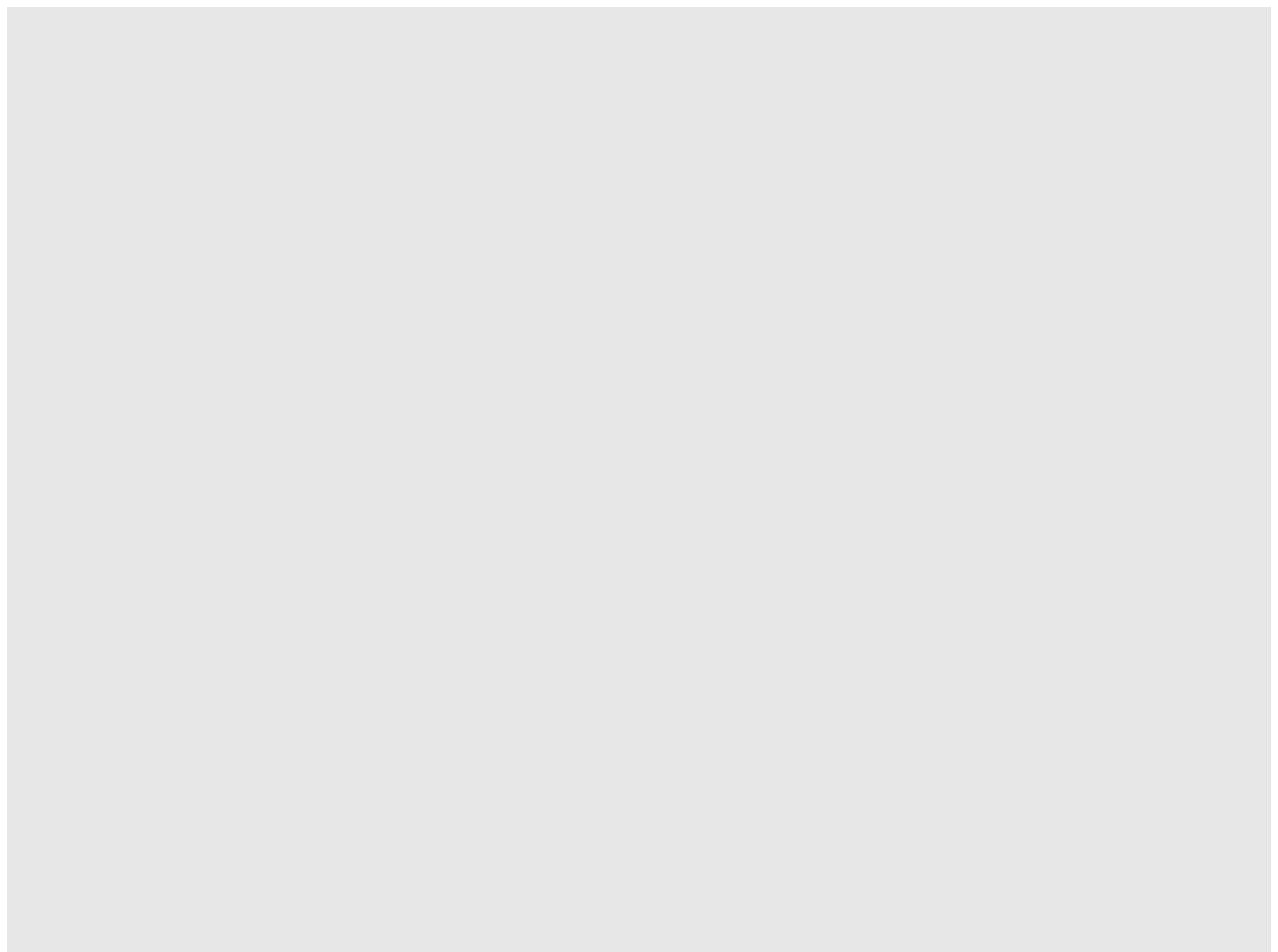
“It was not until we had two outbreaks in long-term care facilities at the end of March [2020] that we all started to see the devastation that COVID-19 could cause,” McKenna Luzynski, an epidemiologist with the Southside Health District, told the Register & Bee.

Nursing homes, filled with vulnerable individuals, were hit hard in the early days. Stringent lockdowns — all with an eye to keeping residents safe — quickly became the norm.

When it started, Chris H. Garrett, local health emergency coordinator with the Pittsylvania-Danville Health District, used the 1918 Spanish Flu as a benchmark for what was unfolding in real time.

“COVID-19 is a different disease, but the overall planning and time expectations do not change,” he explained. It seemed to follow the same pattern.

It soon became apparent those two-week shutdowns weren’t enough. The pause on life extended for the months ahead.



This top shelf at a Danville Family Dollar, which normally holds hand sanitizing products, was completely empty March 12, 2020, one day before a cascading wave of cancellations engulfed the Dan River Region. Register & Bee, file photos

Long hours

To this day, Luzynski still goes to sleep each night with her work phone next to her bed in case someone needs her during the night.

“I worked an average of 60-70 hours per week,” the epidemiologist said of the early months in the pandemic. “We all worked late nights and all day on the weekends.”

Sometimes that meant being on the phone as late as 1 a.m. or answering a call at 4 in the morning.

“Our epidemiologists were easily working 15 to 18 hours a day, seven days a week,” Spillman said.

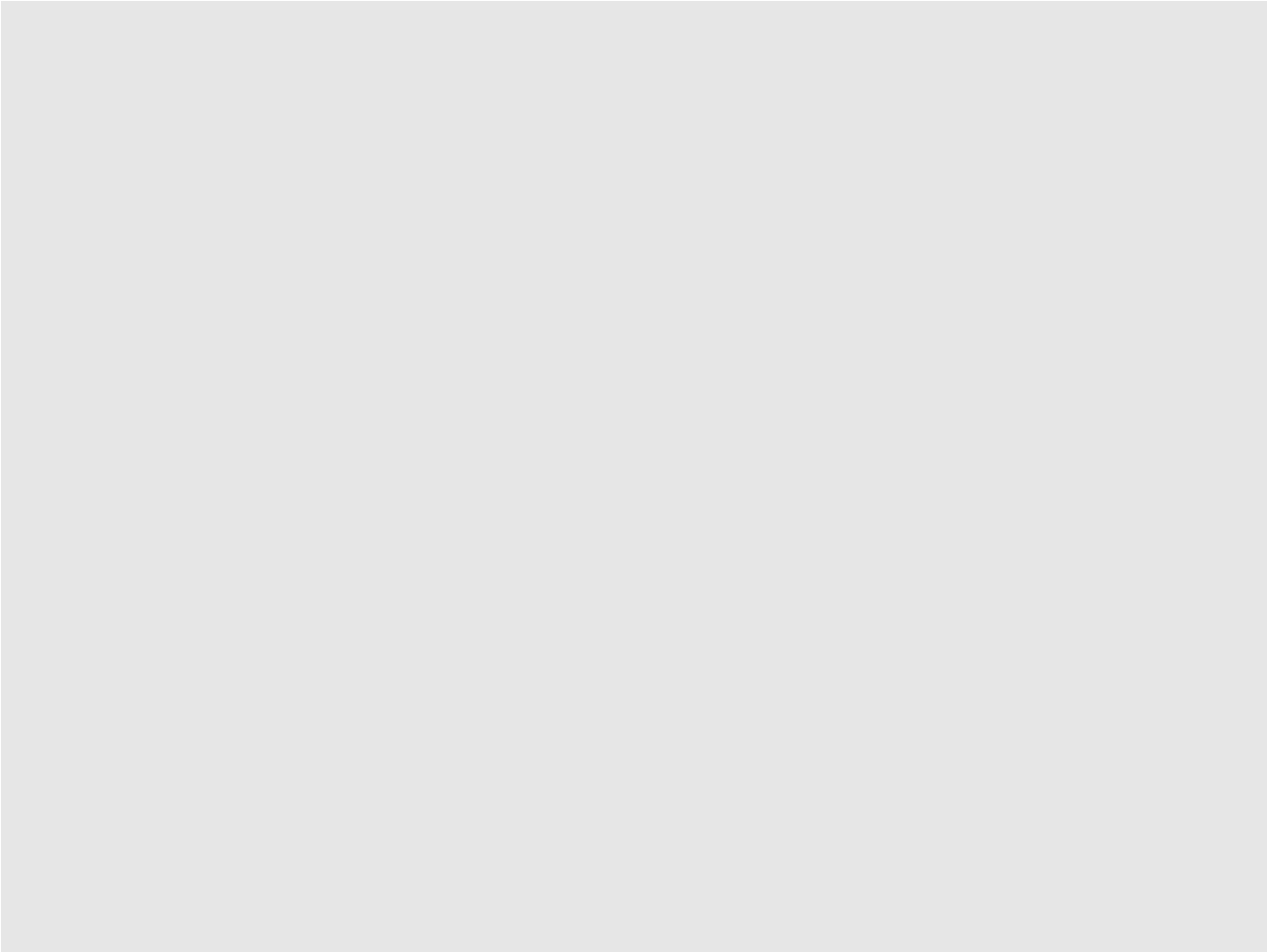
Garrett said it wasn’t uncommon to have people on the job for about 80 hours in a week.

Over at Sovah Health-Danville, emotions were high for the uncharted territory.

“When our care team initially started diagnosing COVID-19 in our hospital, we realized that symptoms of the virus can vary among individuals and spread very quickly,” Dr. Sheranda Gunn-Nolan, market chief medical officer for Sovah Health, said. “These two fundamentals were critical in how we treated and responded to the virus.”

The health system with campuses in Danville and Martinsville wanted to ensure the community it was prepared and had contingencies ready.

“Our quick response and preparedness in unknown conditions demonstrates the power of our employees, the strength of our team, and the value of our community-centered care,” Gunn-Nolan told the Register & Bee. “We wanted to assure our community that our providers and clinical teams are well-trained and prepared to manage outbreaks of viruses and infectious diseases, including the coronavirus. We were in this together — not just as a care team or hospital — but as a community.”



What started as a budget meeting on March 12, 2020, for the Pittsylvania County School Board turned into a briefing about the division's response plans for COVID-19. The next day, Gov. Ralph Northam ordered schools closed for two weeks over the pandemic. Eventually, education facilities were shuttered for the rest of the school year.

Danville Register & Bee, file

Education

Virginia, led at the time by the only governor who was a doctor, became the first state in the nation to cancel classes for the rest of the year.

“Few could have imagined the extent to which our lives and the education of our students would be disrupted,” Pittsylvania County Schools Superintendent Mark Jones told the Register & Bee. “During the initial days of the pandemic, we did not have the luxury of languishing in feelings of shock or disappointment.”

Instead, schools were thrust into coming up with an action plan that extended far beyond the educational environment. In Pittsylvania County, the school nutrition department's staff was among the first to respond.

They put a plan in place for emergency distribution of meals the first week school was closed by order of Northam.

“Even after the governor extended his temporary closure to encompass the balance of the 2019-2020 school year, positivity in the face of adversity characterized the response of every department within our school system in the weeks and months that followed as they rallied to formulate plans to meet the needs of our students throughout the pandemic,” Jones said.

Danville Public Schools Superintendent Angela Hairston remembers watching TV as each state announced schools would be closed for the rest of the year.

“While I was not the superintendent at the time, I could see from afar that Danville was well positioned because of access to technology and the investment in access to the internet,” she said.

At the time, Hairston was the superintendent for Winston Salem/Forsyth County Schools in North Carolina.

“Superintendents across the country were warned to begin planning for virtual and remote planning,” she explained. “Some school districts ramped up their virtual learning plan, while others struggled with the concept.”

Many thought by fall of 2020 things would be back to “normal,” she said. Little did anyone realize a transformational shift in pandemic education was emerging.

Averett University — following step with other colleges throughout the nation — shifted to online learning and moved most employees to a remote working mode. In fact, that decision was announced the evening of March 12, 2020, a day before a cascade of closures engulfed the area.

It wasn't an easy determination to make, said spokesperson Cassie Jones.

"This decision was incredibly difficult," she wrote in an email to the Register & Bee. "Our campus community thrives on close, personal connections and access to supportive relationships between our students, faculty, staff and the larger community."

During a time of year when the college is full of energy, its campus was mostly empty.

"Then when we realized we had to extend the remote instruction for the remainder of the semester, it was an incredibly emotional time for all of us, as these decisions did not come easily," Jones explained. "They were informed with countless hours of debating, strategizing and following the guidance of health officials, all while keeping our students at the center."

It was a similar experience over at Danville Community College. Already on spring break, DCC added an extra week off for students. Later it also moved learning into the virtual realm.

"In March of 2020, we closed our campus and moved to virtual operations with the intent of returning to campus in a few weeks," DCC spokesperson Faith O'Neil said. "No one could have predicted the magnitude of the pandemic or how long it would last."

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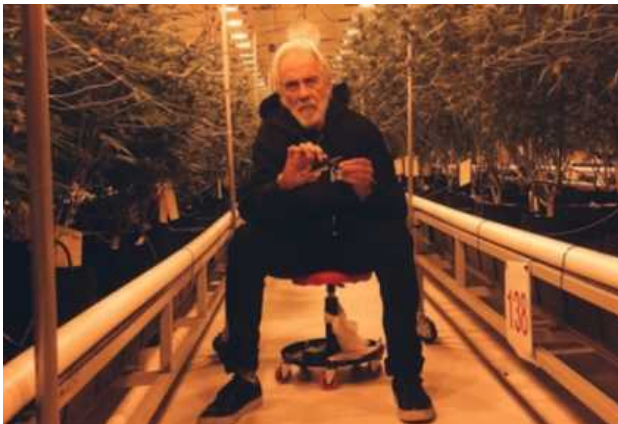
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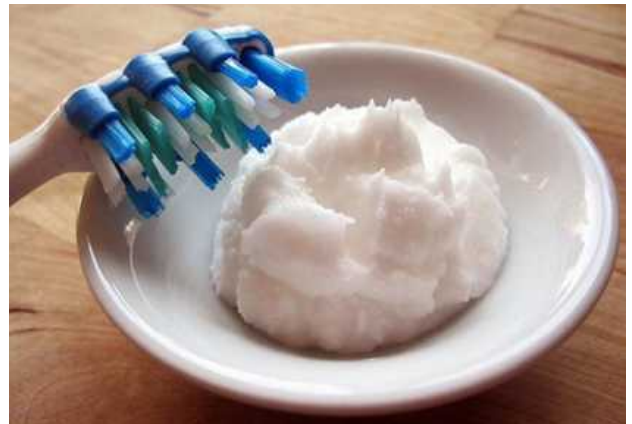
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ALERT

LIFE IN A PANDEMIC | Planning for the next one

Life in a pandemic: Lessons learned from early struggles give crash course on future emergencies

Charles Wilborn

Mar 13, 2022

Editor's note

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The pandemic's early struggles — swirling confusion, scarce testing supplies and a national shortage of personal protecting equipment — provided a crash course for Dan River Region health leaders on being prepared for such an emergency.

And it's not a question of if another pandemic-style disruption will emerge. The real question is when will it happen again.

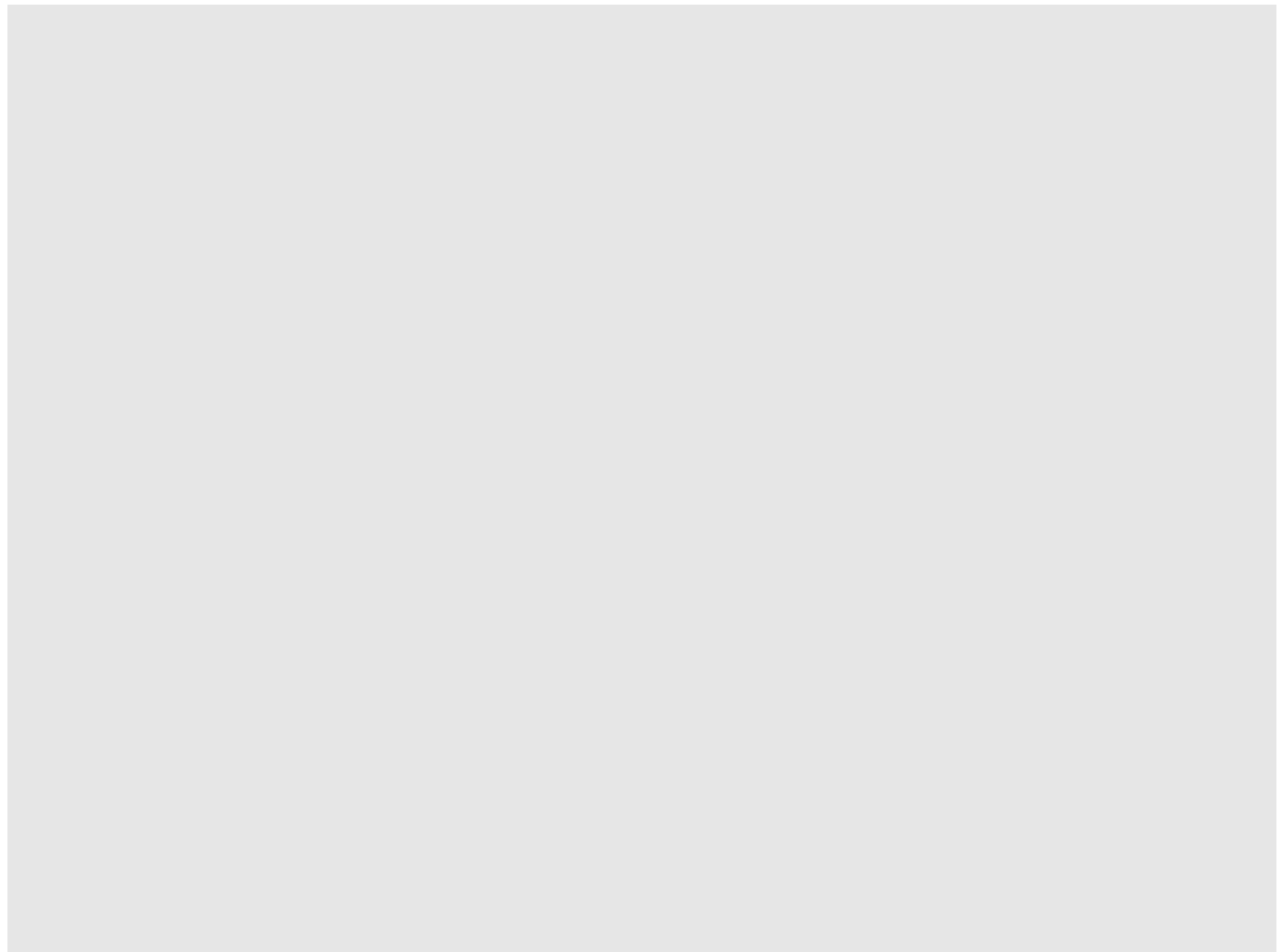
The Virginia Department of Health always stands ready to assist with a variety of situations from the flu to a hurricane, according to McKenna Luzynski, an epidemiologist with the Southside Health District.

“The health department will be looking ahead,” Chris H. Garrett, local health emergency coordinator with the Pittsylvania-Danville Health District, told the Register & Bee.

The lessons learned over the last two years will be molded into emergency operations plans for the district.

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Chris Garrett, the local emergency health coordinator for the Pittsylvania-Danville Health District, speaks to a group of volunteers at a COVID-19 vaccination event on Jan. 23, 2021, at Averett University's North Campus.

Danville Register & Bee, file

“Planning consists of when it will happen again, not if,” he said.

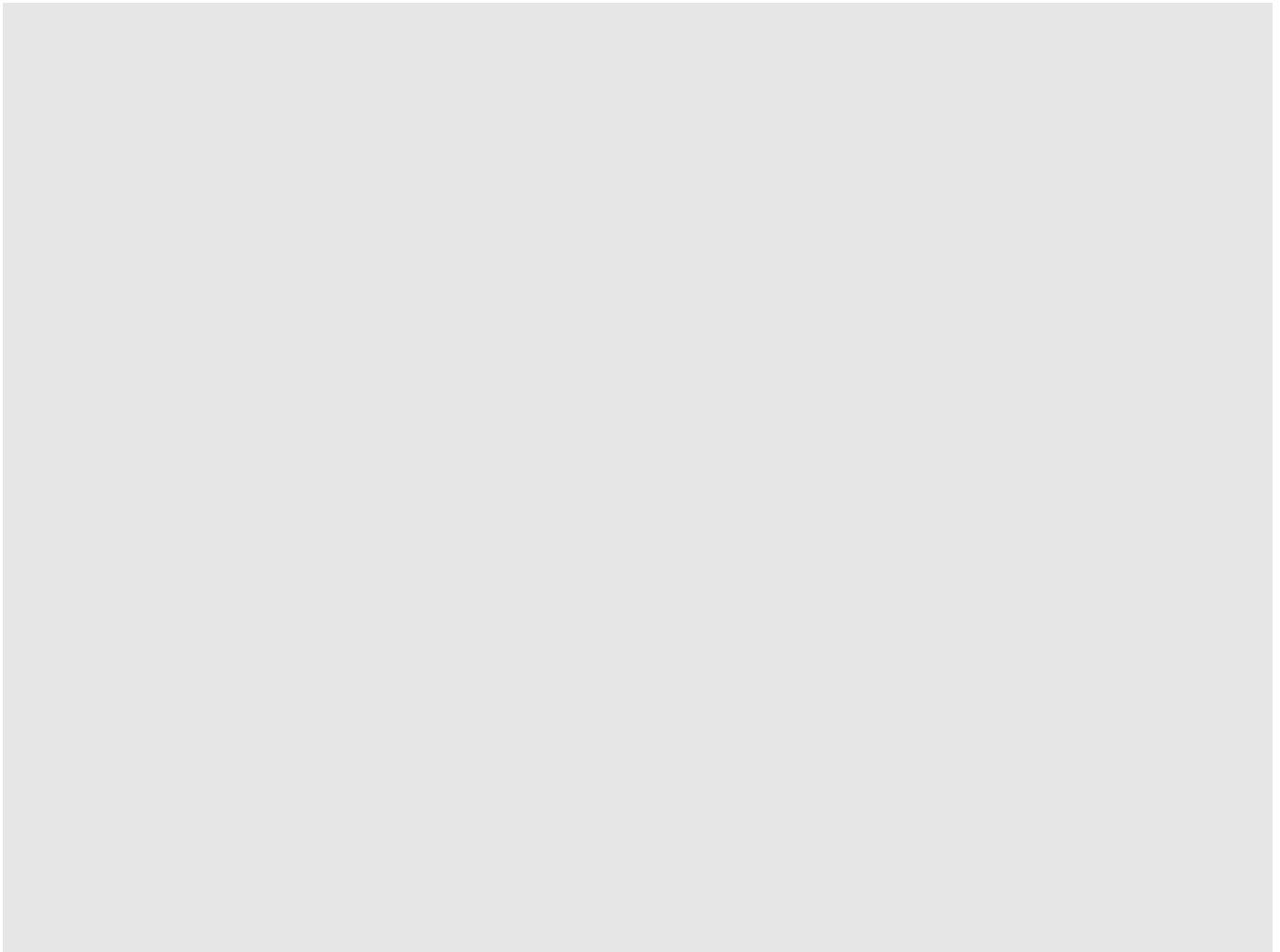
“As for the community, they have been through a lot, Garrett explained. “They have been stretched thin mentally and emotionally, with time they will bounce back.”

He’s hopeful the education and experiences from COVID-19 will aid residents in being ready for whatever the future may hold.

At Sovah Health-Danville, the early stages were made especially difficult making sure they had enough PPE — an acronym that quickly became part of mainstream vocabulary — and other tools to care for the community, said Dr. Sheranda Gunn-Nolan, Market Chief Medical Officer.

“Our top priority has always been protecting the health and safety of our patients and staff, so we implemented protocols to ensure we could provide high-quality care throughout all stages of the pandemic,” she told the Register & Bee.

Gunn-Nolan said Sovah Health was at the forefront of the ever-evolving pandemic.



Dr. Sheranda Gunn-Nolan, market chief medical officer at Sovah Health, receives her COVID-19 vaccine in December 2020.

Sovah Health, contributed

“Our response and actions shaped how many other hospitals and communities prepared for and responded to the virus,” she wrote in a statement to the Register & Bee. “From early on, we understood the importance of a timely diagnosis to prevent further spread of the virus, so we worked closely with our partners to increase access to testing and treatment options to improve outcomes for our patients.”

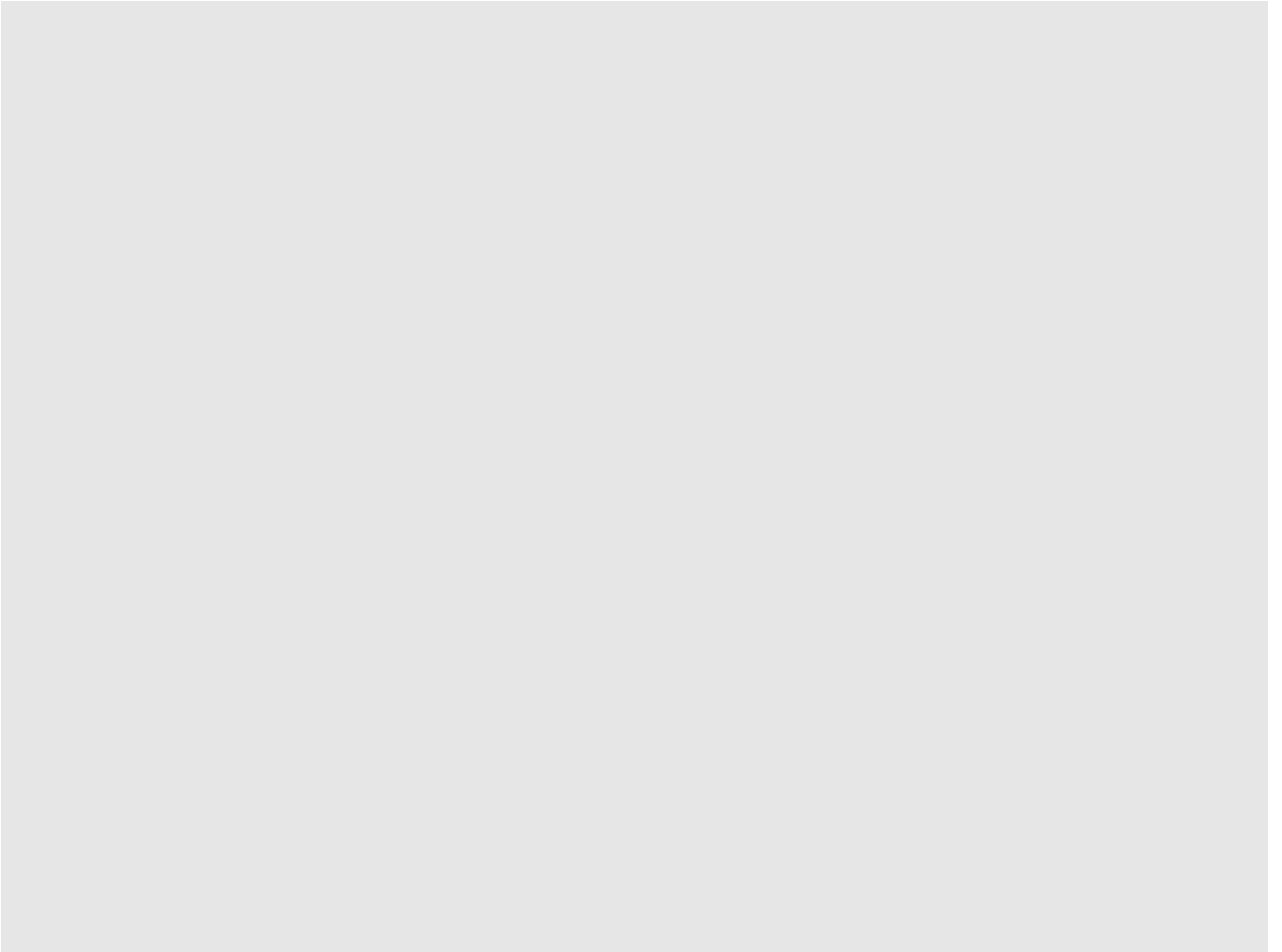
Although COVID-19 was a novel illness, responding to infectious diseases isn’t new to Sovah Health.

“We have tested processes and plans in place to respond to situations involving infectious disease year-round,” Gunn-Nolan said.

Over at the local health department, there’s a full-time local emergency coordinator along with workers for nursing, environmental health, epidemiology and population health, Luzynski explained.

“We have a robust volunteer medical reserve corps, and we have all been trained to respond to events using the Incident Command System, a standardized approach to managing emergencies,” she said.

“We aim to continue building relationships within our communities to ensure we have support and trust in all that we do,” Linda Scarborough, a health department spokesperson, told the Register & Bee.



Dr. Sheranda Gunn-Nolan, market chief medical officer with Sovah Health, right, confers with other hospital workers in 2021.

Sovah Health, contributed

Ultimately, when the Federal Drug Administration paved the way for the first vaccines — via emergency-use authorizations — health department workers finally believed they were at the turning point, Luzynski.

Sovah Health also knew vaccines were the road out of the dark days.

“Early on, we knew the way out of this was a vaccine — I prayed for it,” Gunn-Nolan said. “Vaccines stop pandemics and save lives.”

But along that road, many obstacles popped up. The leading blockage was vaccine hesitancy, an issue that continues to plague rural areas.

“With low vaccination rates in our community, the difficulty continued as more patients lost their lives, and those will always be moments our staff will never forget,” Gunn-Nolan explained.

Dr. Scott Spillmann, director of the local health district, has often analogized the pandemic to a battle.

“If something like this were to happen again — an unknown disease suddenly striking — given what we’ve learned, we know that you can’t go to war with only shields through masking and quarantine,” he told the Register & Bee. “You have to be equipped with swords, which we now have with the vaccines.”

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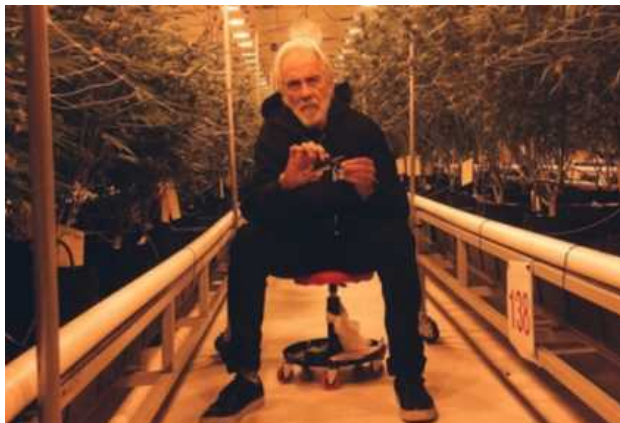
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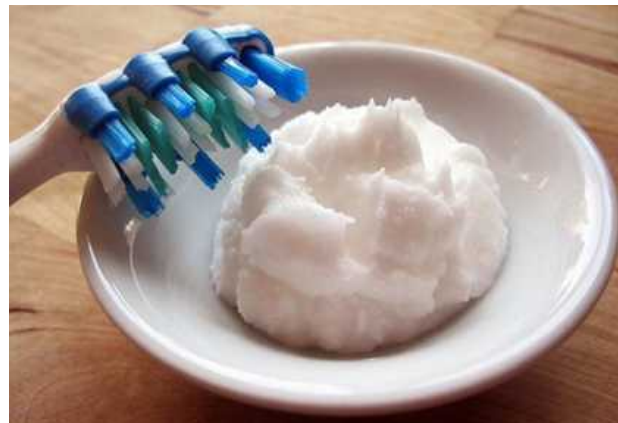


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LIFE IN A PANDEMIC | EDUCATION FALLOUT

Life in a pandemic: Students, teachers thrown a learning curve

Charles Wilborn

Mar 14, 2022



Tunstall High School administrators lead graduates onto the field as "Pomp and Circumstance" plays in June. Register & Bee, file

Editor's note

This is the third in a four-part series examining Dan River Region life in the pandemic.

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Jessica Jones, president of the Pittsylvania chapter of the Virginia Educators Association, likened the sense of emptiness brought about when the pandemic first closed schools in 2020 to a tiny pinhole punched into a cup filled with water.

While liquid remains in the cup, a pool also starts building underneath. And it's not clear where the water is flowing out.

“The thought was to try to get a new cup, but no cups were available and then once you realized it, all the liquid was gone,” she told the Register & Bee.

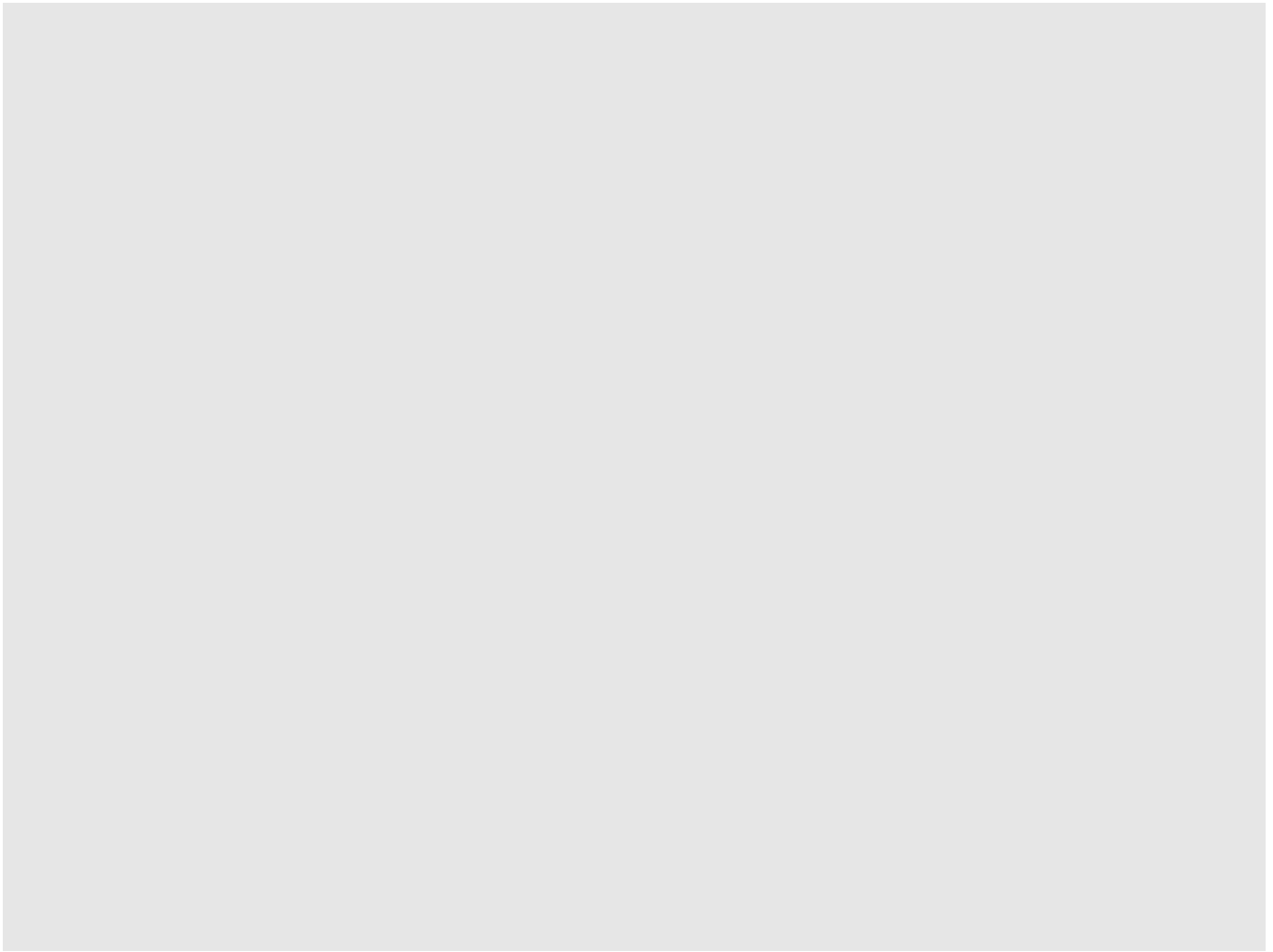
Those early days were “a very sad, trying, confusing, and tumultuous time for everyone because neither the students nor the adults could answer the question of, ‘What do we do next,’” she said.

The initial two-week shutdown in March 2020 because of the growing COVID-19 threat eventually led to closed classrooms for the entire school year, as ordered by then-Gov. Ralph Northam.

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It was then educators knew things would be vastly different.



Gretna Elementary School students participate in classroom activities in a socially distanced setting in fall 2020.

Register & Bee, file photo

Dominated by remote-only learning to start the fall 2020 session, schools switched to a hybrid solution of having students in classrooms about two days in the week while others continued in virtual style.

That provided some teacher-to-student contact, but it was far from perfect.

“There will be many years before we recover the loss that has occurred during these past two years,” Angela Hairston, superintendent of Danville Public Schools, told the Register & Bee. “Smaller classes, mitigation strategies, virtual learning, extended year, increased tutoring and a much needed focus on mental health has been the tip of the iceberg during this last year of recovery.”

For Pittsylvania County Schools, instructional teams worked to minimize the impact of the pandemic as much as possible, said Superintendent Mark Jones.

“Although there is no substitute for in-person instruction, through the creation of innovative virtual learning environments and other measures designed to reach all students, educational professionals throughout the school division worked to mitigate learning loss,” he said.

For example, in 2021, the division provided what he calls a “comprehensive summer school program” to help those who had fallen behind. It also provided door-to-door transportation and meals. Another program is in the works for this coming summer, he said.

In addition, in-school and after-school tutoring options are available.

Jessica Jones explained some students have bounced back, but others still must navigate their way to improvements not only in academics, but social and emotional trauma.

“The business at hand is still the same: meet every child where they are and work with them to get them where they need to be every day,” she told the Register & Bee.

The morale

“As the pandemic rolled on, spirits were frequently tested,” Mark Jones said when asked how the pandemic impacted the morale of teachers and staff members.

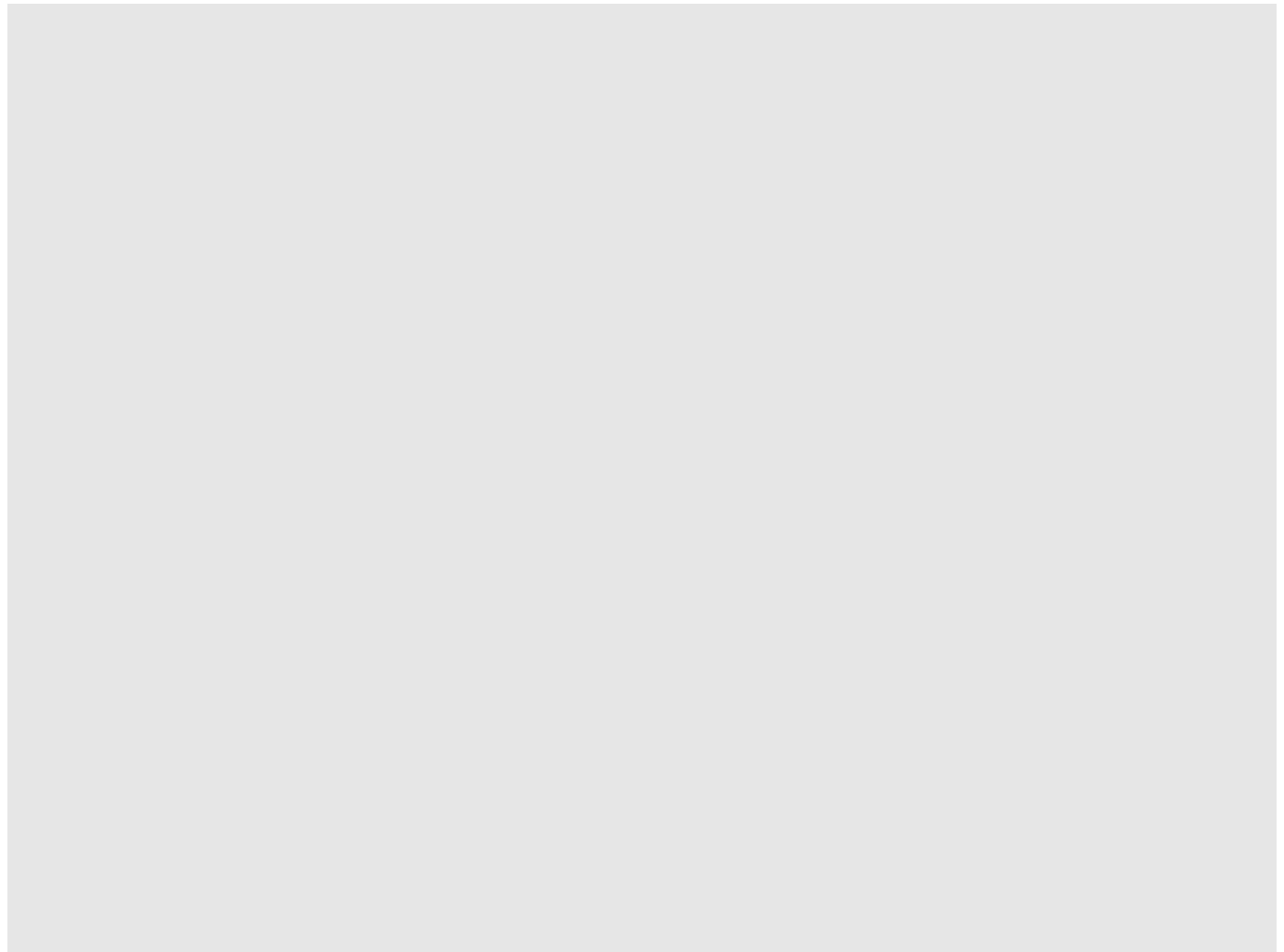
“However, this shared experience only strengthened our ability to respond collectively to circumstances beyond our control,” he explained via email. “It would be inaccurate to claim that the uncertainties surrounding the pandemic and the difficulties imposed by it did not have a dampening impact upon the morale of teachers and staff; however, these individuals, because of their commitment to the students that they serve, worked to maintain their positivity, drawing strength from the knowledge that, through their efforts, they were enabling their students to continue learning despite the effects of the pandemic.”

The drop in morale came from many aspects, Jessica Jones said. In addition to hurdles with education, teachers had to cope with personal loss, like family and friends who died from the virus.

Some weren't able to "maintain finances because of loss of income from working multiple jobs, or not being able to find a rhythm to address all the ever-changing challenges that were occurring in the workplace or at home," she said.

Hairston believes everyone — teachers, staff, parents and students — across the nation should re-prioritized their lives in light of lessons learned from the pandemic.

"We are far more focused on what matters and far more empathetic," she said. "However, unrealistic expectations have plagued our school districts across the nation."



Chatham High School graduates use fans to keep cool at the commencement ceremony in June.

Silver linings

The pandemic spearheaded a technological revolution for many schools, especially those in rural Pittsylvania County. Mark Jones sees that as a silver lining.

“As a result, the term Virtual Learning is now firmly rooted in our educational vernacular and has become a viable alternative to traditional instructional settings,” he said. “The pandemic also showed us the value in the soft things: a hot meal, a kind word or hug from a teacher or friend and perhaps most importantly, a safe place to land.”

In Danville Public Schools, Hairston says there’s renewed focus on equity and access to learning.

“An appreciation for teachers and educators as a whole,” she explained when asked about positives springing from the pandemic. “An improved appreciation for what matters.”

She also pointed to a better appreciation for virtual learning with its Virtual Academy located in a former elementary school.

At Averett University, spokesperson Cassie Jones sees a heightened sense of resiliency and dedication after the pandemic caused so much chaos.

“This pandemic has taken a huge emotional, physical and psychological toll on everyone, but there are gifts that have surfaced,” she explained. “Our students continue to embrace these challenging times with thankfulness and great attitudes; faculty members continue to demonstrate the very reasons why our students appreciate them so much; and our incredibly talented staff — at all levels — work against enormous odds to ensure the care and well-being of our students.”

She said the pandemic propelled an added energy for the campus and helped students and staff members “learn to live in ambiguity and uncertainty.”

At Danville Community College, a food drive in spring 2021 was a memorable moment for spokesperson Faith O’Neal.

“It was wonderful to see our faculty and staff come together to support the community during such a challenging time,” she said. “We served more than 400 families that day with nutritious fruits, vegetables and dry goods.”

The tumultuous time also pushed the use technology for DCC.

“Although we would have never chosen to endure this pandemic, our faculty and staff were able to learn and use new technologies that will persist even after the pandemic ends,” O’Neal said. “These technologies will allow better access for students who cannot physically be on campus.”

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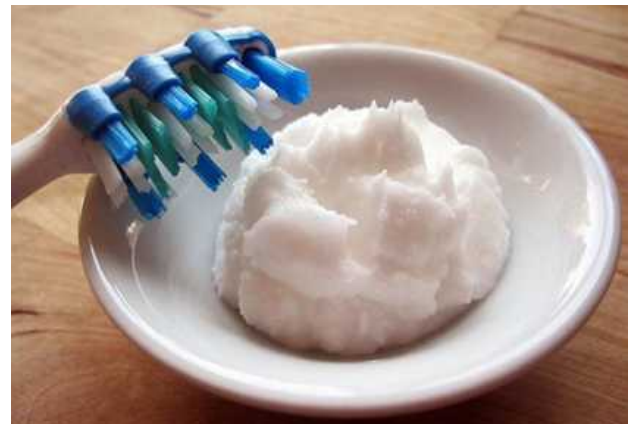
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ALERT

LIFE IN A PANDEMIC | THE POSITIVE IMPACTS

Life in a pandemic: In a nightmarish situation, bonds grow closer than ever for coworkers, community

Charles Wilborn

Mar 15, 2022

Editor's Note

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Casting aside for a moment the heartbreaking blows the coronavirus pandemic dealt the Dan River Region over the last 730-plus days, there have been some rays of sunshine amid the dark clouds.

A striking advance in technology was an early side effect of the illness about two years ago. Working from home — for most — also seemed to bring an added bit of flexibility to what was previously a hectic work schedule.

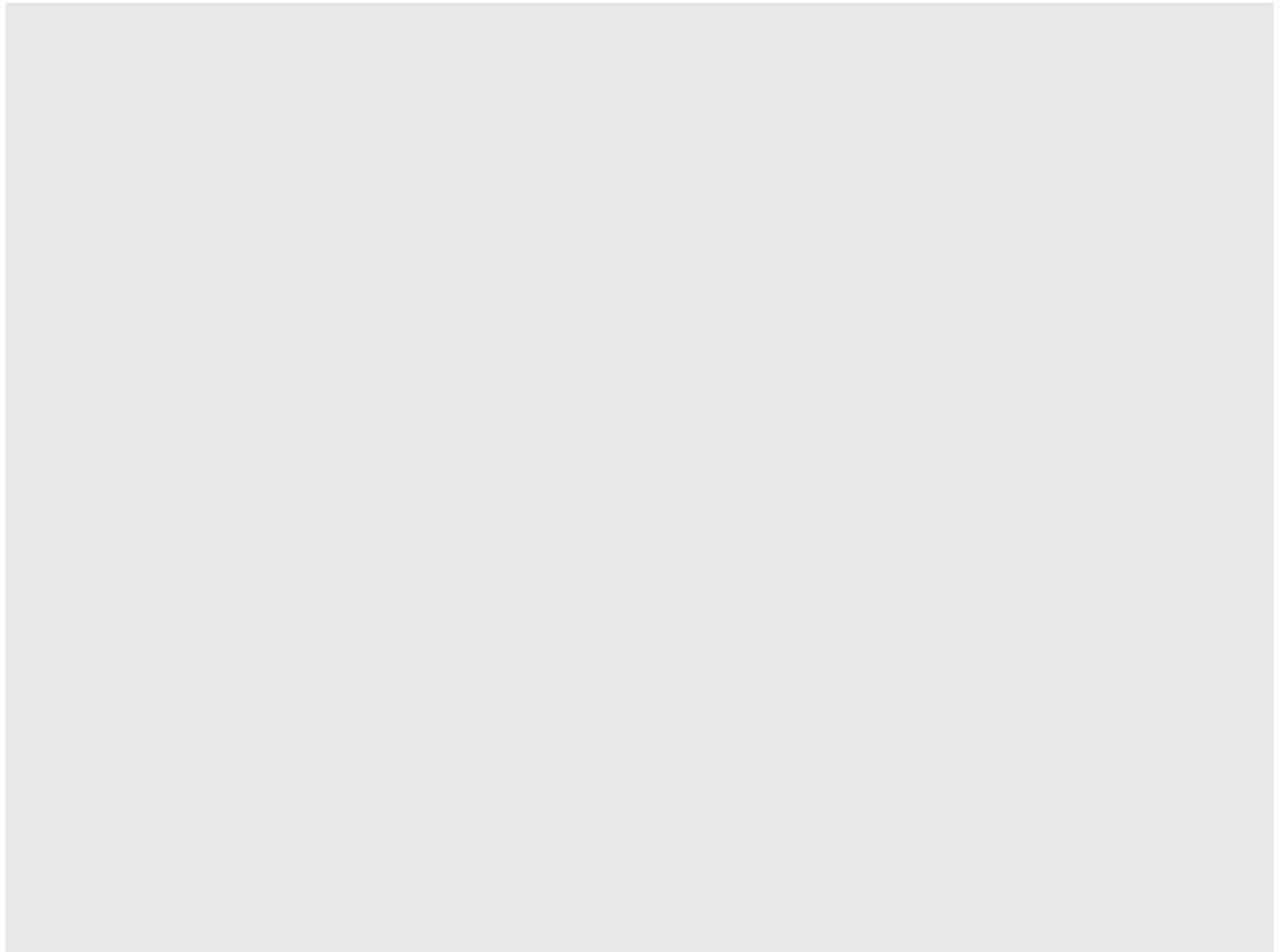
Even for an advanced technical institution like Danville Community College, the pandemic swiftly forced a new wave of virtual education.

“Although we would have never chosen to endure this pandemic, our faculty and staff were able to learn and use new technologies that will persist even after the pandemic ends,” spokesperson Faith O’Neal said last week. “These technologies will allow better access for students who cannot physically be on campus.”

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But those interviewed by the Register & Bee for this series agree the top positive impact was a deeper sense of unity and connection with the community.



Dr. Sheranda Gunn-Nolan, market chief medical officer for Sovah Health (left), huddles with Tiona Featherston, Jackie Robinson, Patricia Doss, Misty Walker, Ashley Willis, Courtney Yarbrough and Rachel Collie in 2021.

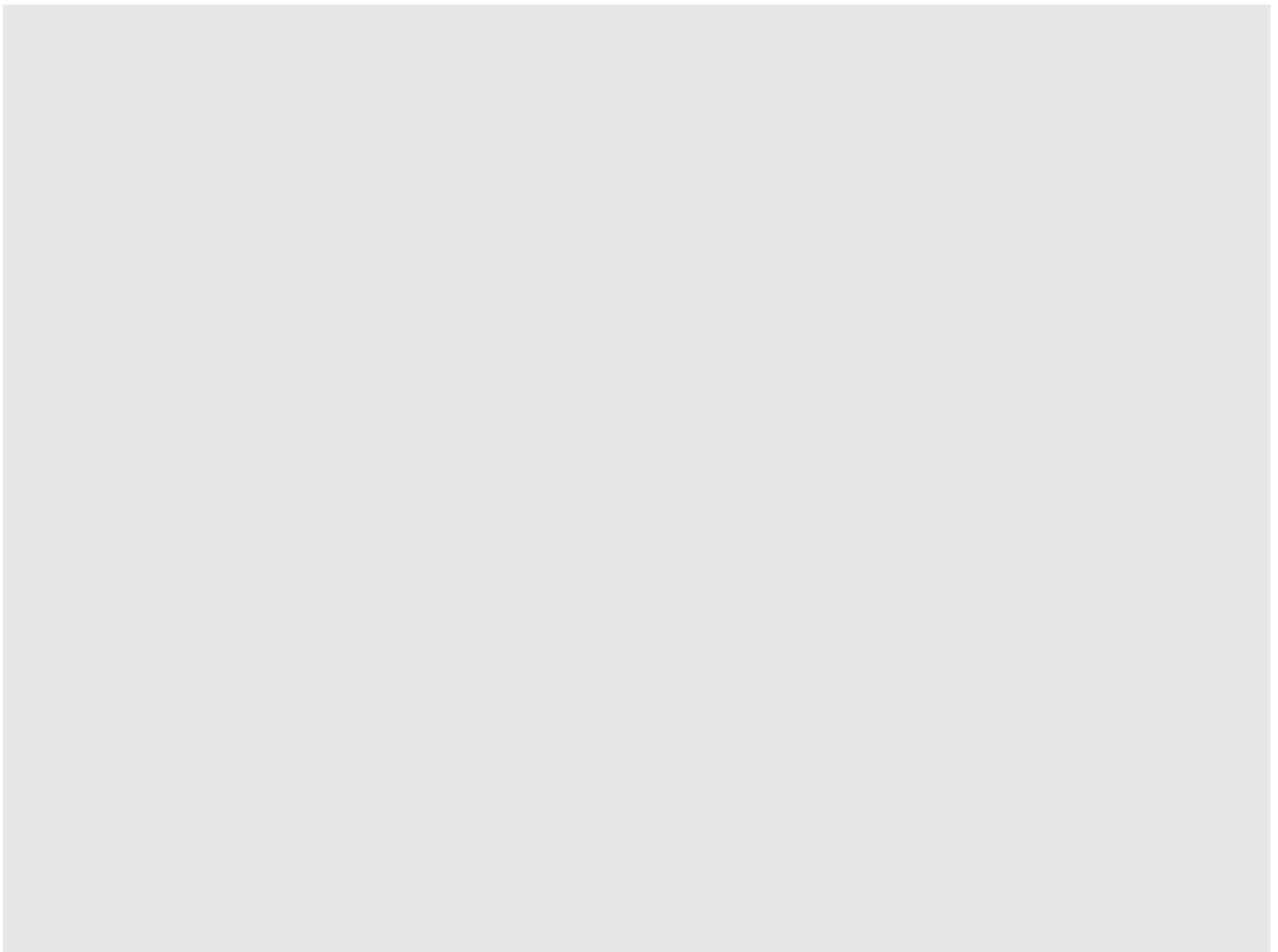
Sovah Health, contributed

“One of the biggest silver linings of the pandemic for us has been strengthened partnerships with other organizations in the area that are working towards the same goals,” McKenna Luzynski, a senior epidemiologist with the Southside Health District, told the Register & Bee.

The constantly changing pandemic opened new lines of communications between the Virginia Department of Health, hospitals, medical providers and nonprofit groups.

“As we emerge from COVID-19, we’ll be able to build on this foundation to collectively move our community towards a healthier state,” she said.

One of the first joint efforts in early 2021 was a community vaccination clinic that brought Sovah Health-Danville, the health department and Averett University — among others — together on a collaborative charge to get shots into the arms of eager Dan River Region residents.



Yolanda Pool, an infection preventionist at Sovah Health-Danville, unboxes several vials of the COVID-19 vaccine in January 2021 at Averett University.

Danville Register & Bee, file photo

“We hosted the first vaccine clinic in the region, and are proud to have helped in the vaccination of thousands in our community,” Cassie Jones, a spokesperson for Averett, told the Register & Bee. “Seeing how a campus and community could unite to care for one another was incredible.”

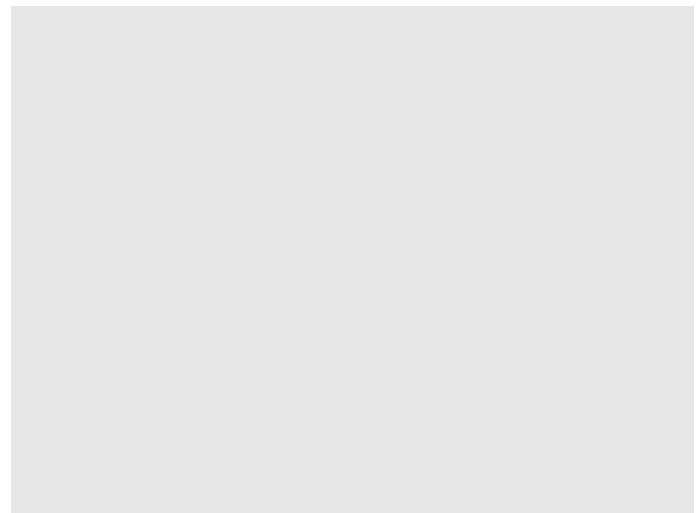
Jones described it as likely the single most “significant accomplishment” during the COVID-19 crisis for the university.

Dr. Scott Spillmann, director of the Pittsylvania-Danville Health District, also praised the newfound connections with faith organizations, governmental leaders and community groups, but said the personal experiences were the most powerful.

“Just as fire does not destroy metal and purifies it, the pandemic has brought our team closer together and we’ve learned to rely on each other even more,” he said.

Beyond the tangible aspects, the ordeal over the last two years strengthened the bonds of coworkers tossed into a nightmarish situation.

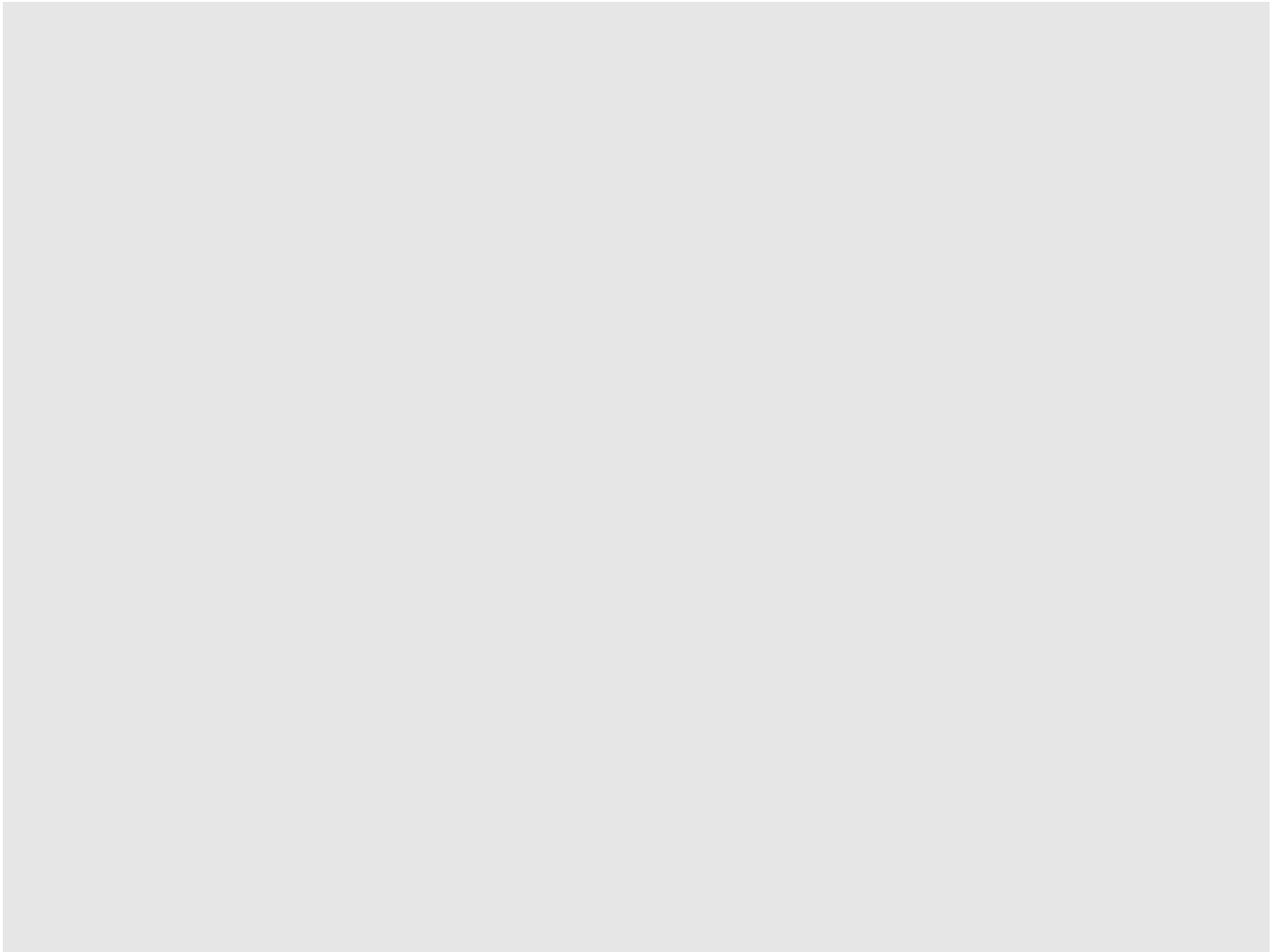
“Any time a team endures a high stress situation, they grow closer,” Dr. Sheranda Gunn-Nolan, market chief medical officer for Sovah-Health, explained to the R&B. “We continue to be amazed by the strength and perseverance of our team members as we approach year three of this pandemic, and we are so grateful for our employees and physicians for their continued dedication to our patients.”



A nurse with the Virginia Department of Health draws a COVID-19 vaccine at a clinic at Averett University.

Averett University, contributed

And it's not just health care workers who built a better team. Education leaders said teachers also have a new bond emerging.



A COVID-19 vaccine card is displayed in 2021 at a vaccination clinic at Averett University.

Parker Cotton, Register & Bee file

“Among the most positive impact has been the sense of common purpose and community that was strengthened among staff throughout the division during the pandemic,” explained Pittsylvania County Superintendent Mark Jones.

But perhaps the greatest impact is a greater awareness of overall health.

“We see people taking control of their health more than previously with routine conversations and discussing risks and the need for preventative care,” Gunn-Nolan said.



By Charles Wilborn

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