

# Nursing Homes...from Page 1A

"I'm cautiously encouraged that things are starting to turn around and look better down there. So, that makes my heart happy."

No Union County Nursing Home residents were hospitalized at press time, and Barnett said all of the 23 residents still experiencing symptoms were improving.

"The rest of the positives

have very mild symptoms or are completely asymptomatic," Barnett said.

Unfortunately, it appears the outbreak in the Hiwassee facility is continuing to spread there, with Chatuge Regional picking up 17 new cases last week alone, bringing the total number of residents infected in the outbreak to 27, or about 28% of the population.

"It's very difficult to say exactly how it entered the nursing home," Barnett said of the Chatuge Regional outbreak that began roughly two weeks ago. "We had a resident who was randomly tested (after exhibiting atypical) symptoms.

"The resident came back positive and was sent to us at Union General to be

hospitalized. That resident is back at the nursing home and doing well, but that seemed to be the start."

Added Barnett, "Very similar to Union, with the increase in prevalence in both communities, we saw an increase in prevalence with staff, and it all kind of coincided with that surge. So, we started monitoring residents more closely and tested all the residents, all the staff.

"It does seem to be a little bit less significant than what we saw initially at Union. Maybe because the resident wasn't quite as ill as that first resident was at Union. The spread seems to be much worse the sicker (patient zero) is."

Chatuge Regional has implemented similar measures to Union County, including negative pressure units and dedicated COVID hallways to keep positive residents safely isolated.

Currently, there are two residents from the Towns County facility being hospitalized at Union General and two residents inside the nursing home with mild symptoms, with the rest of the resident cases being mostly asymptomatic or recovered.

Positive tests among employees are up in both facilities, from 42 to 60 in Union County and 9 to 24 in Towns County over the week before. So far, only one employee from Chatuge Nursing Home has been hospitalized with the disease, though that employee has recovered "and is doing well."

President Donald Trump said recently that shipments of a viable vaccine could be available as early as next month, though it's unclear how or where those would be distributed.

But considering that 8 in 10 COVID-related deaths have occurred in senior citizens aged 65 and older, nursing homes seem a logical first stop for vaccine deliveries.

"We have been getting requests from the Department of Public Health as far as number of residents and employees to start estimating the number of vaccines that we're going to need at all of our facilities," Barnett said. "So, we've given them that information.

"We don't have any estimated date of arrival - we don't have any idea when we're going to have it to

administer, but I will let the public know when we get that communication."

Barnett reiterated that the nursing homes are following all testing guidelines, and that the families of residents are alerted every time a new case crops up in one of the system's long-term care facilities.

According to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, an outbreak is defined as when "any new case arises in (a) facility."

All nursing home residents who have died with COVID-19 were elderly and/or had significant underlying health conditions, both of which are known to contribute to mortality risks with and without the viral disease.

A majority of residents have remained well enough to stay in the nursing homes under observation per Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, Barnett said, with most experiencing mild or asymptomatic infections not requiring hospitalization.

Staff are screened each day at the beginning of their shift for temperature and symptoms prior to beginning work, and Barnett continues to emphasize the impossibility of knowing exactly how the virus entered the buildings.

The chief nursing officer continues to commend staff members at the nursing homes, saying that everyone remains vigilant in working to keep residents safe in such uncertain times, and that both facilities remain on lockdown to outside visitors as they have since mid-March.

Viral outbreaks are fairly common in nursing homes, with influenza and stomach bugs regularly affecting large percentages of long-term care residents nationwide, including in the past in Union and Towns.

Gov. Brian Kemp released new visitation guidelines for nursing home residents, many of whom have been showing clear signs of deterioration during COVID lockdowns to keep them safe, and the local nursing homes look forward to enabling visitations once the outbreaks end.

Fortunately, community spread continues to slow in Union and Towns counties, with the recent uptick in cases mostly attributable to the outbreaks in the nursing homes and an outbreak at

Young Harris College.

The college canceled in-person classes for two weeks following confirmed spread in residential campus spaces earlier this month, but last week reported no spread among employees and a "significant decline in the number of presumed and confirmed COVID-19 cases."

And the local school systems in both communities have experienced limited impacts from the virus. As of Friday - more than a month into the school year - Union County Schools was reporting zero current COVID-positive students and staff, and Towns County only had two students and no staff with current positive cases.

Furthermore, Barnett was happy to report that Union General Hospital was finally down to a single COVID unit instead of two, with nine patients hospitalized for COVID-19 in Blairsville as of Friday: two from Union, two from Towns, two from Fannin, and three from Cherokee County, North Carolina.

"That's huge for us to not have as many inpatients - I think that speaks to the decrease in prevalence in the community," Barnett said. "Our emergency rooms have been extremely busy, but the number of COVID-related visits have been trending down as well.

"I think that's all good news from a community perspective. If we can just work through our issues at the nursing homes, then hopefully we'll continue to see things look more positive for the community overall."

Through the first week in September, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services had linked 54,437 deaths to COVID-19 in nursing home facilities, at the time making up at least 30% of all COVID-related deaths in the U.S.

Separately, Barnett said that seasonal influenza has just about arrived, and she advises people to go ahead and get their vaccinations out of the way "to help contribute to a decrease in flu cases."

"This will be important as we go into the fall and winter season and have to potentially deal with both illnesses simultaneously," Barnett said. "We have already seen a few positive flu cases this week."

# Whittle...from Page 1A



**This year's blood drive took place on the ninth anniversary of Deputy Derrick Whittle's tragic death in a motor vehicle accident that occurred in the line of duty.** Photo by Jarrett Whitener

alive. That is a parent's worst nightmare, is that their child will be forgotten."

Due to COVID-19 cancellations earlier in the year, the blood drive was unable to take place on its originally scheduled date of April 11, so Jim and Sharon decided to hold it on Friday.

"Derrick died on Sept. 18 in 2011, which was nine years ago," Sharon said. "This is our eighth year running the blood drive, and we had to cancel the one in April because of COVID, so we just rescheduled it on his actual date of death."

As of last year, the blood drive had raised 347 units of donated blood. Each unit has the potential of saving three people, which means potentially more than 1,000 people will have been saved due to the drive,

Sharon said. "We had 59 give last year, and our goal is to beat that, even if it is just by one," she said. "We just want to keep getting better every year."

And beat it they did, raising 66 units in this year's outing, and the Whittles want to thank everyone for helping them to exceed their goal.

Of course, all people who donate have a good reason for doing it, including Lorene Sylvia, who finds it important to give blood if possible.

"I do this because it saves people's lives," Sylvia said. "I have given at this blood drive three times, and it is as simple as that - it saves people."

Jim and Sharon Whittle were thankful for those who came to give blood in memory of their son, and they ask that

everyone continue to remember Derrick, who proudly served and protected his community in life.

With law enforcement officers around the country currently under attack rhetorically and even literally in many areas, Jim and Sharon are also happy to lend their support to first responders during these uncertain times.

"Being in law enforcement is an honorable job," Jim said. "There are a lot of good people out there in law enforcement. It just happens there are a few who shouldn't be in it as well.

"We strongly support law enforcement, first responders and everything like that. We need them, and Derrick would still want to be in law enforcement if he was here today. He loved it, and he liked helping people."

# Howard...from Page 1A

involved in her studies at Emmanuel College and is involved with the livestock judging team, collegiate FFA, Union County Young Farmers and many others."

The four past Union County winners were J.N. Cook in 1948, William Clark in 1949, Jackie Dyer in 1955 and Jeff Kelley in 1983.

Sponsored by Case IH, Elanco Animal Health and Syngenta, the award recognizes demonstrated ability and outstanding achievements in agricultural business,

production, processing or service programs.

To be eligible, FFA members must have earned and productively invested \$10,000 through a supervised agricultural experience program in which they own their own business or hold a professional position as an employee.

Recipients must also complete 50 hours community service and demonstrate outstanding leadership abilities and civic involvement through completion of a long list of FFA and community activities.

Less than 1% of FFA members achieve the American FFA Degree.

Each recipient of the American FFA Degree receives a gold American FFA Degree key and certificate after being recognized at the national convention.

The National FFA Organization is a school-based national youth leadership development organization of more than 760,000 student members as part of 8,700 local FFA chapters in all 50 states, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.