

COVID-19 pandemic tears through communities big and small

BY CARTER GIEGERICH
Staff

No discussion of the year 2020 could hope to be complete without a look at the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has impacted the Cashiers community over the past nine months.

Initial cases of the virus in the United States were reported as early as February in some states, but Jackson County did not have its first confirmed exposure until April 12, when two residents tested positive. By that point, extensive lockdown protocols had already been enacted, shutting down in-person learning in schools and introducing the phrase “essential business” into the accepted vernacular.

The federal government began issuing relief checks to individuals in mid-April, providing some level of financial assistance to individuals affected by the

pandemic as more extensive business assistance continued to roll out in the following months.

The first death in Jackson County related to the virus was reported on May 4, just four days before the strictest lockdown regulations were relaxed and non-essential businesses were allowed to reopen at 50 percent capacity.

The summer saw a lull here in Jackson County, as well as throughout the nation, as businesses began to learn how to operate in a safe, socially distant way and outdoor opportunities for socialization mitigated some of the risk posed by gathering with others. The worst days for confirmed positive test results in Jackson County hovered between 25-30 cases through the warmer months.

The arrival of colder weather brought



Chronicle file photo

Students at the Highlands School line up for free COVID-19 testing provided in October.

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More free COVID-19 testing events scheduled for January

The Highlands Cashiers Health Foundation is sponsoring local COVID-19 testing initiatives on the plateau Jan. 4 and Jan. 11. The format will be drive-through at the Village Green in Cashiers from 11 a.m.-1 p.m. and the Highlands Recreation Center from 2:30 p.m.-4:30 p.m. To ensure adequate testing supplies on the day of, participants are encouraged to notify Mountain Park Urgent Care of their interest to participate at info@mtnparkuc.com.

“This post-holiday timeframe is a critical time to be tested because CDC and science tells us positive cases will likely increase after travel and gatherings with family and friends,” said Dr. Richard Ellin, Foundation board member and leader of the HCHF testing project. “Identifying people with the virus helps to avoid a sudden spike, slow the rate of new infections, lower the overall number of cases, ease the pressure on health services, keep our schools open, workforce employed and community activity flowing.”

Participants will be asked to present a photo ID and insurance information on site. Uninsured participants are eligible to participate without cost, however a photo ID is required. Confidential results will be provided directly to participants by phone.

The tests will be administered by Mountain Park Urgent Care based in Sylva, in full compliance with CDC, FDA and NCDHHS guidelines. The County Health Departments are provided COVID-19 test reports as required by NCDHHS.

Please note a COVID-19 test is a one-time indicator. Frequent hand washing, covering your face and social distancing at least six feet apart are also important to protect yourself and others and to slow the spread of COVID-19. For questions and further information please call

the Foundation office at 828-482-6510.

About Highlands Cashiers Health Foundation

The Highlands Cashiers Health Foundation was established on February 1, 2019 as a 501 (c) 3 public charity with a purpose to improve the health and wellbeing of Highlands, Cashiers, and surrounding communities. As the Highlands-Cashiers Hospital successor foundation we are committed to continuing a several-decade legacy of generosity and vision to ensure vibrant and healthy living for our year-round, seasonal and visiting families and

individuals. Through partnerships with organizations, key stakeholders and caring donors, the Foundation aims to make positive and lasting change through investing in projects and programs that advance innovative solutions and improvements in peoples’ health and wellbeing. The Foundation also includes collaborative partnerships that serve the health and wellbeing of all people in western North Carolina, with particular emphasis on Macon, Jackson, Swain, Graham, Clay and Cherokee Counties. For more information, please visit the website: www.hchealthfnd.org or call 828-482-6510.



Submitted photo

Healthcare workers fully covered in PPE perform drive-through testing at a past event sponsored by HCHF. The next free testing events sponsored by the foundation will take place on Jan. 4 and 11.

COVID

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with it a greater risk of community spread, however, as people began to congregate indoors and the virus was able to spread more easily. The term “pandemic fatigue” arose in the fall as well, describing the feeling many people had developed over months of semi-isolated living with no clear end in sight. Cases saw spikes in the upper 30s in mid-October, followed by another lull before massive spikes were detected after the Thanksgiving holidays.

In the past month, cases have gone up at an unprecedented rate in Jackson County – on three separate days in the past four weeks, the Jackson County Department of Public Health has reported 90 or more positive cases. To date, the virus has claimed the lives of 17 people in Jackson County and 2,079 positive cases have been confirmed by the health department.

Learning during a pandemic

The virus has left no one unaffected, but there have been few entities more impacted by the logistical challenges COVID-19 introduces than public schools.

Following spring break in March 2020, public schools in Jackson County announced students would stay home for an additional two weeks as reports of confirmed cases drew nearer and nearer to the region. Blue Ridge School and Early College and Summit Charter School both switched their students over to an online remote learning system in a matter of days.

“It was an enormous amount of work behind the scenes, from curriculum, to technology, to figuring out how to feed kids,” Jackson County Public Schools Chief Information Officer David Proffitt said in the April 8 edition of the Crossroads Chronicle. “Over the past two or three weeks there’s

just been an enormous amount of behind the scenes work.”

By April 1, both schools had announced closures through at least mid-May. By late April, it was clear there would be no more in-person learning for the 2019-20 school year.

Students’ grades were modified to address the nontraditional schedule for the year, with elementary and middle schoolers’ grades switched to either year-end feedback or a “pass/withdraw” option. Students in grades 9-11 were given the choice of receiving traditional grades or a “pass/no credit” option.

While remote learning programs survived their initial test in the spring, laying the groundwork for online education in the fall if necessary, Proffitt said in the April 8 edition there were many springtime activities that students would miss out on this year. The schools also provide many services beyond just classroom instruction that were abruptly changed due to the closures.

“If you’re a senior and you’re looking forward to prom, to homecoming, to spring sports, and suddenly some of those things are being taken away from you, just from an experience standpoint those students are losing something,” he said. “If you’re a student that’s hard to reach, for a lot of those kids school is their safe place. So how can it not have a negative effect there?”

The summer was spent formulating plans for the beginning of classes in the fall, with guidance from Governor Roy Cooper coming in August about what sorts of in-person learning could take place safely. Capacity restrictions were put in place which led BREC to adopt a rotating, hybrid model of in-person and remote learning. Summit Charter School was able to spread students out sufficiently to begin the 2020-21 school year entirely in-person under state regulations.

On Sept. 30, elementary school students were

allowed to return to normal classes four days a week at BRS and, starting in mid-October, in-person classes resumed as normal. The schools’ safety protocols appear to be effective so far, as Blue Ridge has reported no confirmed cases and Summit has only had two confirmed cases in the student body, prompting a temporary switch to remote learning for certain grades during the week of Oct. 7. The confirmed cases did not lead to any reported community spread, and the school has avoided any further cases thus far.

Community support

A comprehensive list of the community organizations involved in supporting those struggling during the pandemic would be impossible to collect – there has been a continuous outpouring of resources from nonprofits, private businesses, healthcare groups and more since the first lockdowns began.

The first community-organized response to the pandemic occurred shortly after schools were initially closed down in March. Local businesses partnered with the Boys and Girls Club of the Plateau and Fishes and Loaves Food Pantry to provide meals to students who would normally receive breakfast and lunch through their schools.

That program was absorbed by the school system in time, but Fishes and Loaves remained busy, holding food drives



Staff at the Ugly Dog Pub in Cashiers posed with the newly installed hand sanitizer station provided by the Highlands Cashiers Health Foundation in the June 10 edition of the Chronicle.

and distributions regularly to help support the nutritional needs of the community. The Boys and Girls Club also provided modified services to participants in an effort to pick up some of the slack left by the lockdowns.

The Highlands-Cashiers Health Foundation has stepped in to address multiple critical needs in the community, focusing their yearly funding efforts on COVID-19-related relief and introducing a number of public health-oriented projects in the months since the pandemic began.

In addition to their usual funding efforts, the foundation has provided funding for many free testing events both through Highlands-Cashiers hos-

pital and through their ongoing support of the Vecinos Farmworker Health Program. HCHF also provided hand sanitizer stations to local businesses as they began to re-open, financed testing for students in local schools, and provided funding to many other organizations for special projects relating to COVID-19 relief.

Other people and agencies across the plateau have stepped up to assist the nonprofits and healthcare organizations in the community as well, including multiple donor-advised funds from local clubs and private donations from individuals. Vision Cashiers has continued to help organize and fund a variety of relief programs and improvements during

the pandemic, along with so many others. In a year in which residents have been urged to stay apart, the community has nonetheless come together in more ways than could be described here.

“In just one week, we’ve already received funding commitments that should get us into May,” Vision Cashiers President Irv Welling said in the April 15 edition of the Chronicle, referencing the food distribution program organized then in collaboration with the Boys and Girls Club. “It’s been truly inspiring to see the caring and generosity in this community to help those who are struggling as a result of economic challenges associated with COVID-19.”

Chronicle file photo

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