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Coronavirus remains top of mind across US, world

COVID-19 reaches nearby communities

By Shawn Jarrard
 Towns County Herald
 Editor

The Georgia Department of Public Health reported Saturday a positive case of COVID-19 in Lumpkin County, which shares a southern border with neighboring Union County.

This news came on the heels of an announcement by the Cherokee County, North Carolina, Health Department last week that five people had tested positive there. Those five remain in isolation across the state line.

Health officials in Cherokee County said the initial case was diagnosed locally in a visitor from New York City, after which others in this person's sphere tested positive.

The visitor participated in a March 10 contra dance at the John C. Campbell Folk School, and the virus spread to a Cherokee County resident who also attended the dance. Neither of these attendees was

a student of the school.

Group-oriented contra moves feature lots of hand-to-hand contact, much like square dancing, and these free dances are attended by community members from Brasstown and beyond, including throughout North Georgia, with frequent attendance by Young Harris College students.

Indeed, the North Georgia Mountains and bordering North Carolina communities are connected in many regards, with cross commerce and visitation occurring regularly over the state line.

"Cherokee County Health Department will continue necessary contact tracing on this patient in identifying close contacts," the Health Department said.

Of the three remaining positive cases, two are locals considered "household contacts" of the visiting New York resident, while the third is in town from Illinois and had been staying in the same

Cherokee County home as the New Yorker.

"Both of the Cherokee County individuals and the Illinois case have been on isolation since before becoming symptomatic," the Health Department said of the remaining three. "For this reason, contact tracing on these three cases will not be necessary.

"We can say with great certainty that these cases were isolated during the symptomatic phase of the illness and therefore had little to no opportunity to spread the virus."

After the initial diagnosis, the Cherokee County Health Department said there was no ongoing risk of exposure at John C. Campbell, but that people should contact their local health department if they develop COVID-19 symptoms, including fever, cough or shortness of breath.

Addressing the issue for the public, the Brasstown-based Folk School said that



Towns County stakeholders came together in a March 17 meeting to discuss the coronavirus pandemic that is sweeping the globe.
 Photo by Todd Forrest

approximately 90 students and community members attended an introductory contra and square dance on March 10 from 7-8 p.m.

"As of March 10, there were no federal, state or health

department recommendations or bans for limiting the number of attendees for public events," the Folk School said.

After the state issued guidance on limiting event size March 13, "the Folk

School suspended all activities including events, dances and classes through April 18," and as of March 21, "we have suspended all activities until further notice."

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County leaders gather to share COVID-19 responses

By Todd Forrest
 Towns County Herald
 Staff Writer

Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw hosted community leaders and the media inside the courthouse on March 17 to address concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We're going to be transparent," Bradshaw confirmed at the outset of the meeting. "We're going to go to the public every so often to let you know where we're at in Towns County."

Joining Bradshaw were Hiawassee Mayor Liz Ordiales, Young Harris Mayor Andrea Gibby, Hiawassee Police Chief Paul Smith and Young Harris College Police Chief Ken Henderson.

Also in attendance were Towns County EMA Director Brandon Walls, 911 Director Marty Roberts, Fire Chief Harold Copeland and EMS Director Ken Nicholson.

Towns County Sheriff's Office did not attend the



Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw
 Photo by Todd Forrest

meeting. At the time, it was in the process of reviewing various programs to enable multiagency teleconferencing amid coronavirus concerns.

The Sheriff's Office settled on a program Thursday called GoToMeeting and successfully tested it Friday, and it will be used on an ongoing basis to share updated information and

recommendations between all departments moving forward.

All of the leaders in the March 17 meeting fielded questions while discussing the steps that each respective agency was taking to keep its employees and the community safe.

Bradshaw made clear that he was maintaining constant contact with state and federal officials. He also said he's staying in touch and sharing information with fellow county commissioners regarding their decision-making processes.

Residents can find valuable community information at www.townscountyga.org, as well as the "Towns County Emergency Management Agency" Facebook page.

Closings are widespread across the county, Bradshaw said, including county office buildings, the Recreation Department, the Transit System, Bell Mountain, the Mountain Region Library System and the

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Student leadership highlighted at annual speech competition



2020 Top of Georgia Student Development and Public Speaking Contest Participants
 Photo by Chad Stack

By Chad Stack
 Towns County Herald
 Staff Writer

After six weeks of rigorous training, 21 local students demonstrated their leadership and public speaking skills during the 12th Annual Top of Georgia Student

Development and Public Speaking Contest at the Civic Center on March 10.

The competition was a bipartisan effort sponsored by the Towns County GOP and Democratic Party, and it consisted of students competing from middle and

high school divisions, including kids from Towns County High, Eastgate Life Academy and homeschooled.

Samantha Church served as the organizing chairwoman in 2020. As a former competitor and 2019 champion, Church

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Virus concerns delay federal sentencing for Gowders, Heaton

By Linda Erbele
 Towns County Herald

Three Blairsville men scheduled to be sentenced in federal court this week for prescription drug fraud have had their court appearances postponed due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Former Hospital CEO Mike Gowder, his brother and former emergency room Director Dr. David Gowder, and former Blairsville physician Dr. James Heaton were set to appear in the Gainesville courthouse, but that was before the appearance of COVID-19 cases in Hall County.

The sentencing for Heaton and Mike Gowder has been rescheduled from March 25 to April 21, though David Gowder's sentencing – originally March 23 – had not been rescheduled by press time. All three remain free on bond until sentencing occurs.

David Gowder pleaded guilty just over a year ago, on March 15, 2019, to a single count of prescribing oxycodone to a patient without a legitimate

medical purpose.

At the time of his guilty plea, he faced dozens of charges, including counts of illegally obtaining a controlled substance, distributing controlled substances for no medical reason, and obtaining controlled substances by fraud or misrepresentation.

As part of his plea, Gowder agreed to forfeit his Georgia medical license, disclose financial matters and cooperate with the government's investigation, though he was never called to testify in his brother's case.

In a court filing last week, federal prosecutors recommended a 34-month sentence for David Gowder in what they called "the middle of the applicable Guidelines range."

Similar recommendation filings for Mike Gowder and James Heaton were not available by press time.

Mike Gowder and James Heaton were co-defendants in the same federal prescription drug case in which a jury of their peers found them guilty



on Oct. 24, 2019, after nearly two weeks of trial.

Heaton was convicted of 75 counts of dispensing prescriptions to Mike Gowder without a legitimate medical purpose; Mike Gowder was convicted of 75 counts of aiding and abetting those charges.

Furthermore, Gowder was convicted of 27 counts of acquiring controlled substances by fraud, with Heaton being found guilty of aiding and abetting those counts.

Additionally, the jury found Heaton guilty of 27 counts of dispensing prescriptions without a legitimate medical purpose to two other patients.

David Gowder was

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Higher census participation expected amid coronavirus

By Jarrett Whitener
 Towns County Herald
 Staff Writer

For everyone staying busy with social distancing and isolating at home, what better activity than performing one's civic duty by filling out the census?

Yes, it's that time. After 10 long years since the last one, the 2020 census is finally here to enumerate the population once more. And while it's officially set to be taken on April 1, "the census has actually already started," Pat Malone said.

Malone heads up the Complete Count Committees for Union and Towns counties as part of a statewide initiative to maximize census participation "to make sure that we get a complete and accurate count within the state of Georgia."

For months now, he has been working hard with volunteer committees in both counties to disseminate information to households regarding the importance of the census, and Malone has spoken at countless local meetings



Patrick Malone and gatherings in the leadup to census mailings.

"The letters have started coming out on the 12th of March, and for the first wave of letters, all households will receive a letter between the 12th and the 20th of March," Malone said.

People can complete the census over the phone, by mail or – for the first time in the history of the census – over

the internet, and it should take less than 10 minutes to fill out online, with completion time varying depending on the size of the household.

But even if it takes just 10 minutes, why should people bother with filling out the constitutionally mandated census? Because it's a really big deal for every last person in America, Malone said.

For starters, the U.S. government uses population totals derived from the census to allocate billions in federal dollars across individual states, counties and cities nationwide.

Inaccurate census data can do real harm to communities missing out on these dollars, which go toward funding public health, family and children services, education, roads and transportation, neighborhood improvements and more.

"There are about \$680 billion in federal taxes that are distributed based on the census, and those are for programs like the school lunch

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