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Dr. Kelley urges vaccination among hesitant residents

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Dr. John Kelley has been enjoying retirement since the start of the year, doing some farming, developing property, serving on the Young Harris City Council, spending time with family, working in his shop on various restoration projects, including classic cars and furniture.

Essentially, he has stayed busy with the things that have always occupied his time aside from practicing cardiology at Piedmont Heart of Blairsville. But that doesn't mean he has stopped monitoring the state of health care in the region, state and nation.

To the contrary, Dr. Kelley has been watching with growing concern as more and more people become sick

with the incredibly infectious delta variant of COVID-19, especially those making up the overwhelming majority of hospitalizations and deaths: the unvaccinated.

And now, he's appealing to the good people of the mountains – the very people whom he credits as a fifth-generation native to become the man he is today – to get vaccinated if they are eligible and haven't done so already, as severe illness is fully preventable in most cases.

"This is a health care crisis," Dr. Kelley said. "If it was just health care and it did not translate into economic burden, the ability of people to maintain a livelihood – if none of the ripple effect was there, then people would say, 'It's my life, I can do with it as I want to.'"

"But the bottom line is

that, when it comes to a pandemic, your life affects my life. And that's the bottom line that I think people need to understand. Why would you jeopardize your children, your grandchildren, or your best friends? Why would you impair their health?"

"That's what an unvaccinated person is doing: it's not just affecting them."

All one need do is look at the data coming straight out of the Data General Health System, which serves people from around the region, to see that greater than 90% of all severe COVID cases requiring hospitalization locally are among those who have chosen not to be vaccinated.

"Is the vaccine perfect? No, it's not, but it is as close to perfect as any vaccine we've

See *Get Vaccinated*, Page 8A



Retired cardiologist Dr. John Kelley has enjoyed retirement this year, pictured here with his latest project – a beautiful 66 Chevy truck. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Health System continues to break COVID inpatient records

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

The month of August brought with it an incredibly rapid rise in severe COVID-19 cases in the region, starting with a handful of coronavirus inpatients at Union General Health System that increased week over week to set multiple daily records for admissions at the local hospital.

And Friday, Aug. 27, saw yet another high of 51 people being treated in-hospital for COVID-19, plus 21 people admitted for other reasons, bringing the number of inpatients to 72 for a 45-bed hospital.

Patients being treated hail from North Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee, though

the bulk of them are coming from Union County, according to Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett. Chatuge Regional Hospital in Towns County was also over capacity for inpatients as of Friday.

"We will do our very best until we can't anymore," Barnett said. "I don't know (how many more patients we can take), because it's not really even just about space – it's about staffing, too. We'll just keep going and do our very best to take care of everybody."

Added Barnett Aug. 27, "We are currently holding some patients in the ER waiting on beds at both hospitals, some for COVID and some for regular beds."

The Health System has



paused elective procedures while executing its surge plan, Barnett said, though "we do continue to do anything urgent/emergent, and we have (Operating Room) staff on standby for C-sections and other general surgeries that can't be put off."

See *UGH COVID*, Page 8A

Courthouse project on hold due to materials, labor shortages

GDOT to make new turn lanes on US 76

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

A major side effect of the pandemic has been the impact on access to construction materials and building equipment, particularly with acquisition of existing supplies and new production, with both being tied to labor markets that are struggling to fill manufacturing and shipping needs.

Unfortunately, Towns County has proven just as vulnerable to COVID impacts as the rest of the world. That's why Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw has decided to hold off on pursuing funding and construction for the big courthouse renovation and addition project.

As background, voters last June approved the county's



Bradshaw Director Laura Edge with Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw in Friday's called meeting. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

1-cent Special Purpose Local Election, as the Secretary of State decided to move the General Primary to June. percent of the overall vote – and COVID even impacted the

See *Courthouse*, Page 3A

'Prominent Towns Women,' Hayden recognized in meeting

By Chad Stack
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County Historical Society members and history lovers gathered inside the Civic Center last month for a special presentation by Society President Jerry Taylor.

Taylor, who serves as county historian, devoted his presentation to "Prominent Towns Women," including 12 civic-minded women whose examples Taylor said should challenge everyone to be better citizens.

Among these women was the first woman president of Young Harris College, Ella Standard Sharp, who assumed her husband's position at the school following his death in 1930.



Marty Hayden explaining what went into the making of his newly donated sorghum painting titled "Innovative Mountain Folk Making Sorghum Syrup." Photo by Chad Stack

Then there was Margaret Corn "Maggie" Berrong, the first woman to attend and graduate college; Birdie Bryan Miller, the first woman to serve

on a jury; and Tassie Kelley Cannon, who served in the Georgia Senate.

Taylor also honored the

See *Historical*, Page 3A

Sheriff's Office recovers stolen equipment at local campground

News Special
Towns County Herald

On July 8, the Towns County Sheriff's Office investigated an incident of stolen property out of Hall County at the Enota Mountain Retreat in Hiwassee.

Located was a piece of heavy equipment that was fitted with a tracking device, and as a result, Richard McAllister Jr., 25, was arrested and charged with theft by receiving stolen property.

After further investigation, the Towns County Sheriff's Office and Cherokee County, Georgia, Sheriff's investigators executed a search warrant Thursday, Aug. 19, locating an additional piece of heavy equipment stolen out of Cherokee County, Georgia.

On Monday, Aug. 23, the Towns County Sheriff's Office and the Cherokee County, Georgia, Sheriff's Office followed up and executed an additional search warrant on the property



Sheriff Ken Henderson, Chief Deputy Gene Moss and Sgt. Bill Conway with a recently recovered stolen tractor. Photo/Facebook

owner of Enota Mountain Retreat. McAllister over to Cherokee County, Georgia, investigators.

Investigators located additional stolen property that included heavy equipment, a trailer full of stolen property, and a number of other stolen items, all taken from Cherokee County, Georgia, as well as other areas.

The Towns County Sheriff's Office arrested Richard

See *Stolen Equipment*, Page 8A

Federal attorney responds to Gowder's request to vacate

Appeal date set in Heaton case

By Linda Erbele
Towns County Herald

The U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Georgia has filed a response to former Union General Hospital CEO Mike Gowder's April motion to vacate his conviction for prescription drug fraud.

As previously reported, Gowder began his year-and-a-day prison sentence on May 1, just weeks after filing his request to have his conviction and sentence thrown out.

Gowder made four claims in his request, including that U.S. District Judge Richard W. Story had erred in not allowing him a separate trial from his co-defendant, former Blairsville physician James Heaton.

Additionally, he contended that the government selectively prosecuted him, and that the evidence against

him was insufficient to convict on any basis other than his "guilt by association" with Heaton.

Concerning the claim of selective prosecution, Gowder wrote that he was "selectively scooped up and selectively prosecuted solely because of his (association) treatment from Dr. James Heaton," and that his actions "standing alone" were not criminal.

Filing his motion pro se – that is, without an attorney – under U.S. Code 2255, Gowder further claimed he had been deprived of his constitutional right to "effective assistance of counsel," and he appeared to be arguing that his other claims fell under the same deprivation.

Apparently, the appropriate venue for Gowder's first three claims should have been on appeal of conviction instead of in a 2255 motion



Mike Gowder

alleging ineffective assistance of counsel, but Gowder missed the deadline to file a notice of appeal.

Missing this deadline is at the heart of Gowder's overarching claim that his legal counsel was ineffective, as he

See *Gowder*, Page 8A

TCSO seizes meth, \$4,000 in stolen property during arrest

News Special
Towns County Herald

On Tuesday, Aug. 17, the Towns County Sheriff's Office and Clay County, North Carolina, Sheriff's Office initiated an arrest for Sheila Marie Larson, 35, of Andrews, North Carolina.

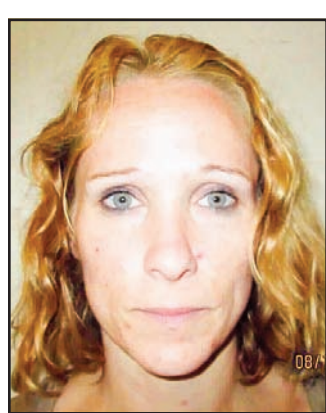
She was arrested on the following charges: possession of drug-related objects, possession of methamphetamine, and theft by receiving stolen property.

During the arrest, an

amount of methamphetamine was seized along with \$4,000 worth of stolen property.

Sheriff Ken Henderson stated that working with Clay County Sheriff's Office and other agencies is important and vital to the success of the proactive approach to policing by the Towns County Sheriff's Office.

Residents wishing to report criminal activity of any kind may do so anonymously at <https://www.townscounty-sheriff.org/>.



Sheila Marie Larson

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Lake Levels

Blue Ridge	1,683.47
Chatuge	1,924.51
Nottely	1,772.83

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8/31 vs. Social Circle 5 PM

9/2 vs. Chestatee 5:30 PM

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COVID Testing Research Event

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Historical...from Page 1A

first woman Division of Family & Children Services Director Elaine Rogers England; the first female war correspondent to go abroad in World War I, Cora White Harris; and the first woman who donated land to Young Harris College, Nancy Louisa Haynes Stephens Sanderson Robertson, who has an award named after her at the college.

Irene Hackney Berry was the first woman mayor who also donated land to Young Harris City Hall. Towns County's first visiting teacher was Mary Will Hunt Philips. And Fay Harmon Clegg Hoag was recognized by the state as one of the "Gracious Ladies of Georgia."

And the first woman philanthropist was identified as Shirley Carver Miller, the wife of the late Zell Miller, who served as Georgia governor and in the U.S. Senate.

As Taylor introduced each woman, a family descendant spoke about on their behalf, detailing all the amazing things they were able to achieve during a time in which women were predominately viewed as stay-at-home housewives.

In other business, late last year, the Historical Society received a painting from local artist Marty Hayden titled "Vanishing Heritage with Fear of the Future," a 60-by-48-inch acrylic on board painting highlighting the complicated history surrounding the manmade Lake Chatuge.

As members and guests entered the Aug. 9 meeting, they received a postcard featuring Hayden's painting. Copies of this postcard are available at the Old Rock Jail for a small fee, though the jail has been closed for the season except by appointment due to COVID-19.

Hayden, who is a member and beloved guest of the Historical Society, had another surprise for members that Monday night.

After finding a photograph online from 1934, he proceeded to research it to see if anyone could recognize the people in the photo, but to no avail.

Because the photo was



Hayden also painted this Vietnam-era Military Police helmet for fellow Historical Society Member Sid Turner, who is pictured here holding it.

Photo by Chad Stack

not his and he didn't have the rights to reproduce it without paying a fee, Hayden drew inspiration from the photo to paint a similar picture but with different people and other features highlighting Towns County.

Honoring the heritage of the area, his newest piece of artwork is of men working at a sorghum mill using apparatus made from wood "with all the gears and everything," Hayden said.

He added some of the men's family in the painting and a brand new 1957 Chevy truck. Included also is an old barn in Young Harris as well as the old Appalachian Produce Stand located at the intersection that goes into Hayesville.

As he was working on the first painting, Hayden said several people would ask him how long it took him to finish a painting. So, to keep track of the time and dates, Hayden said he put the dates and the time spent working on the backs of the paintings.

Amazed with what people during those times were able to accomplish, Hayden said he included a little message on the back of the latest painting: "One should always be amazed for what the early modern folk achieved out of sheer creativity and determination."

Hayden's paintings are on display at the Old Towns County Rec Center, which is the Historical Society Head-

quarters, though currently, the AC is not working, so the monthly meetings have been moved to the Civic Center until the AC is fixed.

Also in the meeting, Historical Society Member and Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter Sons of the American Revolution Vice President Sid Turner presented some artwork that Hayden had created for a reunion he was attending.

After seeing Hayden's work, Turner said he approached him to see if he could paint something on his Military Police helmet that he wore during the Vietnam War. The artist finished the helmet painting and brought it to Turner at the meeting.

The painted image is from a mission Turner described to Hayden involving an embassy rescue for which Turner was sent to locate his lieutenant and another fellow MP.

Additionally, Hayden painted every name from Turner's unit around the helmet, and the former MP said he was amazed with the work Hayden had done.

"It was better than I could have ever imaged," Turner said.

The Historical Society will meet again on Monday, Sept. 13, at 6 p.m. inside the Civic Center. For more information on the society, including up-to-date announcements, be sure to visit the society's Facebook page.

Sheriff's Office presents Money Smart class for older adults

Frauds, scams and other types of elderly financial exploitation information and training session: Towns County Sheriff's Office is pleased to offer Money Smart for Older Adults. During this 2-hour class you will learn about different types of frauds and scams which are targeting our elderly community, as well as tips to avoid falling victim.

A few of the topics to be covered are: Telephone Scams, Computer/Internet Scams, Investment Fraud, Medical Identity Theft.

Wednesday, September 8, 2021, 10AM-Noon at Towns County Civic Center

Please contact Jill Gittens at (706) 896-4444 to reserve your seat; class size is limited.

Courthouse...from Page 1A

The estimated \$12 million SPLOST began its six-year collection cycle last October to go largely toward financing major renovations and an addition to the Towns County Courthouse, which dates to 1964.

Originally, the referendum called for the issuance of a SPLOST-backed General Obligation Bond not to exceed \$8 million to facilitate the courthouse renovations as quickly as possible. But that was before COVID struck.

Bradshaw came up with and began executing his plan for this SPLOST project well before the onset of the pandemic, back when it was completely rational to expect building materials and the workforce to be available on demand.

But when the pandemic set in, suddenly everything ground to a halt for a period before ramping back up with incredible speed. Commercial building took off alongside people streaming out of cities to buy and build homes in less densely populated rural areas like the North Georgia Mountains.

This created new pressures on the building industry, as people contended with COVID restrictions, illnesses, and a development boom, all combining to create shortages in multiple markets and sectors of the economy.

So, when the time came to take out that SPLOST-backed General Obligation Bond to fund construction, Bradshaw decided to hold off for several reasons.

As construction was unable to begin right away, he did not want the county to take on debt prematurely. But even if construction could have occurred at that time, the costs of building materials had already skyrocketed due to sudden scarcity.

This second factor increased the initial completion estimate of \$8 million to \$9.4 million, meaning that in less than a year's time, projected costs ballooned an additional \$1.4 million merely in reaction to pandemic market forces.

The whole idea of bonding to begin with was to secure debt service that would be cheaper than the cost of inflation resulting from pay-as-you-go.

But since markets have become unpredictable and even undeliverable for more

than a year now, after careful consideration, Bradshaw has decided on a different strategy.

Announced in an Aug. 27 called meeting, he said he will postpone construction of the courthouse renovation and addition until he has saved up enough SPLOST collections to pay for the project outright.

"Basically, what we're going to do is let the money build in the SPLOST account," Bradshaw said. "After talking to the architects, they're still having trouble getting certain materials, like commercial windows and doors, heating and air units for commercial buildings, like if we were moved into the old Rec Gym.

"That's what our plans were to do, and our plans are still to do that, but they're talking months and months out (just to get heating and air equipment). So, we're not going to secure any funding; we're going to let the money build up in the account so that we're gaining interest and not paying interest."

The commissioner hopes that the building materials, equipment and labor markets will have improved by the time the county has collected the money it needs over the next couple of years to completely pay for the renovations and addition without having to take on any debt.

Bradshaw said SPLOST collections were thankfully meeting projections, though he highlighted the possibility that the pandemic could impair future sales tax collections, underscoring yet another reason not to bond into SPLOST-backed debt amid such uncertainty.

"We have money in the bank in our 'rainy-day fund' that you can borrow from and pay back with SPLOST as it comes in, so we have that option as well, so that will increase our (likelihood) of being able to do it sooner than later," Bradshaw said. "And we're excited about it."

"We can't wait to get it done. The community's excited about it, and it will be done, but this is not the time to build right now. We need to give it a little more time."

In the meantime, the county will be preparing the old Rec Gym for when the courthouse offices are ready to move there during renovations of the main courthouse

building, which will occur prior to construction of the addition.

To further offset costs, the county will be able to use some American Rescue Plan Act funding toward the prevention of COVID transmission within the courthouse and temporary office location.

Also in the Friday called meeting, Bradshaw was thrilled to announce that the Georgia Department of Transportation was finalizing plans to install a series of left-hand turn lanes off US 76 West at several locations, including at Asiano Restaurant and Papa's Pizza To Go.

Bradshaw has been lobbying GDOT for years now to improve turning safety on US 76, as multiple turn-offs require people to sit in the fast lane while trying to make a left, resulting in accidents over the years that Bradshaw believes could have been prevented with turn lanes.

He also said that GDOT is studying traffic for potential safety improvements at the span of road between Marina Station and the Sand Bar & Grille, as this is an area that experiences dangerous pedestrian crossings from the lake.

In other business, Bradshaw accepted the update to the Title VI policy concerning federal anti-discrimination requirements for Towns County Transit.

Transit Director Laura Edge said that, if people need a ride to a doctor's appointment, the grocery store, or for some other errand, all they have to do is call 706-896-0925. Transit riders are asked to schedule rides well in advance, as the transit remains busy.

Service is available curb to curb, Monday through Friday, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. excluding official Towns County holidays.

One-way fares are \$2 for the first mile and 40 cents for each additional mile to any accessible location in Towns County, costing \$2 for each stop and \$2 for returning home. Round trips to Blairsville cost \$6 each way for a total of \$12.

For more information, visit <http://www.townscounty-ga.org/transit.html>.

In other news, Bradshaw said the county meeting in September may need to be canceled due to the ongoing regional rise in COVID-19, but he will hold it if he feels he can do so safely.

Gowder...from Page 1A

says he requested his counsel to file the notice after sentencing but was told by his attorney that "additional funding" would be required to pursue the case further.

In his motion, Gowder writes he had to let his attorney go due to lack of funds, leaving him "entirely without the assistance of counsel for his notice of appeal, and on appeal," thereby resulting in him being unaware he could still appeal his case after separating from legal counsel.

"Defendant's attorney rendered deficient performance by failing to inform Defendant that he was entitled to an appeal, and that Defendant could file a pro se Notice of appeal by a simple letter to the court," Gowder wrote in April.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Laurel Boatright responded in an 18-page brief filed last month that Gowder was "barred from raising prosecutorial misconduct in (a) 2255 motion unless he can show cause excusing his failure to raise the issue previously, i.e., ineffective assistance of counsel, and actual prejudice resulting from the alleged error."

"With respect to the first three claims, it is not clear whether Gowder is asserting claims of court error or ineffective assistance of counsel," Boatright wrote.

"Regardless," she continued, "those claims are either procedurally defaulted, affirmatively contradicted by the record, or counsel's conduct was reasonable. Moreover, Gowder has not demonstrated prejudice as to the three claims."

"Gowder's fourth claim, that his counsel failed to file an appeal when Gowder asked him to do so, requires a limited evidentiary hearing. But the record is sufficient for the court to dispose of Gowder's first three claims without a hearing."

Ultimately, the U.S. Attorney's Office has recommended denial of Gowder's first three claims along with the scheduling of an evidentiary hearing to ascertain whether his attorney failed to file an appeal after being asked to do so.

If granted, an evidentiary hearing would require Gowder's legal counsel from the trial to come before the judge and either deny his for-

mer client's claim that he was asked and failed to file an appeal or admit he was ineffective.

Although the deadline for Gowder to file an appeal has passed, should the court decide that his attorney was indeed ineffective, it could allow him an "out-of-time" appeal.

According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons website, Gowder is scheduled for release on March 4, 2022, which is about two months shy of his full year-and-a-day sentence.

This release date reflects Federal Sentencing Guidelines that allow prisoners who have served 85% of their sentence to be eligible for release if they have had good behavior.

No date for an evidentiary hearing had been determined by press time.

Concerning Gowder's co-defendant, James Heaton, who filed an appeal to his conviction in July 2020, the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals has set a tentative date of Dec. 13, 2021, for oral arguments on that appeal.

As last reported, one of Heaton's attorneys had failed to renew her membership in the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals Bar, but it was renewed in June, so the appeal is pending.

Stolen Equipment...from Page 1A

presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

The monetary value of the stolen property recovered at the Enota Mountain Retreat is in the tens of thousands of dollars.

Sheriff Ken Henderson would like to thank the Towns County Sheriff's Office and Cherokee County, Georgia, investigators for their long hours and hard work committed in this case. The investigation remains ongoing.



Some of the stolen property recovered by the Towns County Sheriff's Office at Enota Mountain Retreat. Photo/Facebook

Get Vaccinated...from Page 1A

ever had," Dr. Kelley said. "Is the current surge affecting people who have been vaccinated? Yes, because there's a different variant out there, and there's another one after that one."

"All the variants are not equally susceptible to the vaccine, and that's why, over time, new generations of vaccine will evolve to try to keep up with new generations of the virus. So, it's a battle. We truly, in my opinion, are in a war with this virus."

"There's some areas of the country where the success has been great, and there's some where it's just been dismal. And all the hospitals are currently filled with cases that are predominately unvaccinated people."

Of course, once people do become fully vaccinated, Dr. Kelley said the odds of a better outcome in the event of a breakthrough infection are much higher than contracting COVID-19 without vaccination.

"More than likely you're going to be able to be treated as an outpatient, and if you're admitted, you're very unlikely to be in the ICU or on a ventilator if you've been vaccinated," Dr. Kelley said. "Now, is it zero? No."

"It's not, because the variables that we're dealing with have to do with people's health that they carry with them every day. The more comorbidities that you have, the more likely you are to suffer complications of COVID."

Barring general health improvements - losing weight via diet and exercise, cessation of tobacco products, etc., which Dr. Kelley continues to recommend as a retired cardiologist - he believes the best and easiest thing a person can do to dramatically lower their odds of severe illness with COVID is to be vaccinated, especially if they have pre-existing conditions.

But even for younger, healthier-seeming people who

have no known pre-existing conditions, Dr. Kelley said there is no guarantee against bad outcomes, or that unvaccinated healthy people won't spread the disease to others who are more likely to suffer severe illness.

"We've got to face today, and today, we need to be unified in our response, because it truly is a health care crisis," Dr. Kelley said. "It's not somebody else's problem. It is every individual's problem, because it affects not just yourself, but it affects everybody you know, everybody you love, everybody you care about, in addition to all the people that you don't even know."

"It's a time to see really what we're made of. Are we able as a nation to come together and fight for a common purpose, the health of our nation? Because if we become continually infected, ultimately, we're going to become vulnerable as a nation."

Dr. Kelley regrets the politicization of COVID, the vaccines, and so much else during this pandemic, and he wants people to know that, while others may have an agenda outside positively influencing health, he has spent his career and now his retirement simply trying to help people make better health decisions.

Having embarked on his medical journey more than five decades ago, the doctor committed 34 years to improving the health of patients in the Augusta area. In 2006, he returned to his beloved mountains to begin a successful cardiology practice with Piedmont Hospital before retiring at the end of 2020, nearly a year after the global onset of the novel coronavirus.

For the sake of the community he loves, he wants people on all sides to put politics aside and focus on solving the problem at hand, and that includes the vaccinated and unvaccinated alike.

He understands it might be tempting amid heightened

tensions spurred by yet another surge of increasingly infectious SARS-CoV-2 to shame or blame unvaccinated individuals for circulating the disease, but this is unlikely to be helpful in the current politicized climate.

Instead, Dr. Kelley believes people simply need to be talked to with respect about the choices they may yet make to impact their health and the health of those around them.

"I want people to know how much I love my mountain community," Dr. Kelley said. "This is my heritage, and this is my people who made me who I am and helped me get to where I got to in life."

"And I want to say thank you for the privilege and the opportunity to help care for your health care needs over the last 14 years. I would appeal to people to just please trust what I say. Please."

In the end, Dr. Kelley hopes to convince hesitant residents to make the decision to protect themselves and others with vaccination, because he doesn't want to see any more people succumb to or spread a disease for which the worst outcomes are largely avoidable.

"The bottom line is, if you care about others and you care about people in your community, then I think you're going to be vaccinated," Dr. Kelley said. "And I think most people care."

People should consult their doctors if they have further questions about the vaccines, their side effects, and even concerns about potential unknown long-term risks associated with both COVID-19 and vaccination against it.

COVID vaccines are available for free and without appointment at the local Health Department, and people may also find them at any number of local pharmacies.

For more information on vaccination and the state of COVID in Georgia, visit <https://dph.georgia.gov/covid-19-daily-status-report>.

UGH COVID...from Page 1A

"We hope it won't be a long pause, but we just have to take it day by day," Barnett said, adding the Health System appreciates the community understanding the pause that will remain in effect until staffing and space availability return to more normal levels following the current surge.

Union General did see its first pediatric COVID patient of the entire pandemic for a short stay last week; that patient has been discharged "and as far as I know is doing well," Barnett said.

She continues to stress the fact that patients admitted for COVID remain overwhelmingly unvaccinated, consistently running between 90%-95% of all people hospitalized locally for the novel coronavirus, though re-infections still appear to be the rarest admissions for COVID.

Barnett said the percent positivity among inpatients tested for COVID-19 was in line with Georgia Department of Public Health data, which through Friday had the county sitting at 33.6% for the last two weeks, putting Union in the Top 10 counties for positivity of all 159 counties in the state, with both Towns and Union experiencing at least three COVID deaths in August.

Of course, the stress levels are high everywhere, including in the community and inside the hospital, where medical professionals are working around the clock to serve the needs of patients who come seemingly as fast as they go.

"We certainly appreciate the encouragement of our staff," Barnett said. "They need encouragement; they are tired and weary, and they're doing their very best to take care of everybody that presents here."

"Working extra, working long hours, working hard when they're here - what they're taking is stressful. So, we appreciate every gesture that's been made by the community. There have been cards and food and snacks and other things. We just appreciate that so much."

"We appreciate the patients and their understanding that when the organization

is this stressed, we certainly want them to continue to come when they need us, but at the same time, we need and desire their patience as we have to triage and take care of the sickest."

"They may have to wait a little while, so we appreciate their patience and understanding and kindness toward our staff if they do have to wait. We'll do our very best to see everybody as quickly as we can, but (again), the organization is stressed."

"And we don't discourage anybody from coming to the ER if they have an emergency. We do have walk-in clinics in our community for things that are not emergent, but we don't want to discourage anybody from coming in and seeking medical care when they need it."

Fortunately, Union General is not having to divert patients to other health systems, though even if the hospital wanted to, Barnett said they would be unlikely to do so because "there's nowhere for them to go - all the hospitals around us (are) going on diversion."

"We don't want to take ambulances out of the county for hours trying to find a hospital to take our own community members to," Barnett said. "So, we appreciate the community using the emergency room for what it's intended for, especially during this time, so that it cuts down on unnecessary ER visits."

"At this time, even though we are above capacity and we are stressed, we do not intend on going on any sort of formal diversion. We are just pushing through and taking it one day at a time. I'll be so excited when we actually see a peak and see that we're coming down the other side of it, but I don't believe we've seen that yet."

In terms of staffing, Union General is facing shortages similar to much of the country, which is seeing overworked, exhausted health care employees leave the industry.

hospitals.

"But more importantly, we have truly good people working with us who care about our patients and community and about each other. I don't know what we would have done otherwise."

"They have been willing to work extra hours, often outside of their comfort zones, and harder than ever even though they are weary. But yes, we have lost some staff."

Union County's population remains on par with the state average at 43% fully vaccinated - up a percentage point in the last week - and Towns County continues to exceed the state average at 46%, though Public Health and others are actively trying to improve those numbers.

In solidarity with the overworked hospital system, officials associated with the Union County Government implored residents via Facebook last week to get vaccinated and to take the ongoing surge seriously:

"Each one of us loves Union County and wants to continue 'business as usual,' so this is our reminder to everyone that we do not want to shut down our recreation activities, county facilities and programs, festivals, etc. So, we would like to encourage and remind you to wear a mask, social distance, wash hands, and even more important, get vaccinated if you can."

COVID vaccines are available for free and without appointment at the local Health Department, and area pharmacies are also offering walk-in vaccinations to all residents.

Department of Public Health free COVID-19 testing is available Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Allen Creek Soccer Complex located at 2500 Allen Creek Road in Gainesville.

Running through Thursday of this week from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., people may get free local testing at a Children's Healthcare of Atlanta and Emory University COVID Research Event at the Union County Farmers Market. Residents will receive a gift card for participating, and all ages are welcome.