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The Latest: A local update on COVID-19

BY CARTER GIEGERICH
Staff

With positive COVID-19 results soaring across the country, state officials in North Carolina have enacted new protocols to attempt to slow the spread of the virus that has now claimed more than 300,000 American lives.

Starting on Dec. 11, North Carolina began a modified stay-home order which required bars, entertainment venues, restaurants, personal care businesses and other businesses to close at 10 p.m.

“We already have strong safety protocols and capacity limitations in place - including a statewide mask requirement,” said Governor Roy Cooper in a press release announcing the stay-home order. “With this additional action beginning Friday, we hope to get these numbers down.”

Statewide, COVID-19 cases have continued to rise at an accelerating speed. There have been at least 4,500 new cases discovered in North Carolina on all but one of the days this month, and the total number of deaths from the virus has risen to nearly 6,000 since the

first cases appeared here in the spring.

Local spike

Jackson County has seen a dramatic increase in the number of cases reported to the health department in recent weeks, with multiple record-breaking days occurring since Dec. 1. On Dec. 7 the county shattered the previous record of positive cases in a single day with 95 new cases. On Dec. 14, the Jackson County Department of Public Health reported more than 100 new cases in a single day for the first time.

“We have seen a dramatic increase in Jackson County - we’re currently experiencing four outbreaks in all our long-term care facilities, and the number is growing every day. It is hard to even give accurate numbers on that,” said Deputy Health Director Melissa McKnight. “We’re also experiencing significant community spread, and experiencing the post-holiday spike we expected to see.”

With Christmas right around the corner, McKnight said she feared those numbers

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Recognizing our heritage

Hotel Cashiers wins the 2020 Village Heritage Award from Cashiers Historical Society

The Cashiers Historical Society recently announced that the Hotel Cashiers is the recipient of the 2020 Village Heritage Award.

Presented annually by the Historical Society, the Village Heritage Award recognizes buildings that have been adapted for use as an active business that contributes to the vitality of the community. Award winning structures are those that best exemplify the village character of Cashiers.

In announcing Hotel Cashiers as this year’s winner, Village Heritage Award committee chair John Barrow commended the business for working to maintain the character of Cashiers.

“The hotel is an excellent example of the ways in which creative entrepreneurs can preserve the charm and unique character of older structures in Cashiers while simultaneously providing in-demand facilities featuring up-to date comforts and conveniences,” Barrow said. “The renovation of the hotel celebrates the past while successfully meeting the present day needs of its guests.”

The Hotel Cashiers exists because of the vision and determination of co-owners Brett Stewart and Daniel Fletcher. With backgrounds in the hospitality industry, Stewart and Fletcher recognized the need for additional lodging in Cashiers. In 2019, they purchased a well-situated but sleepy, old motel on the hillside overlooking Slabtown Road.



Submitted photo

Daniel Fletcher, co-owner of the Hotel Cashiers is shown at left holding the plaque immediately after receiving it. Standing behind the hotel sign is John Barrow, chair of the Village Heritage Award Committee.

Instead of demolishing or radically altering the building, the new owners decided to preserve the original structures and integrate them with the latest, up-to-date amenities. They installed all new mechanical systems, added

high speed internet connections to each room, completely redid the interiors and refreshed the exterior and grounds.

Although they modernized the hotel, Stewart and Fletcher successfully

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Pisgah Legal Services opens plateau office

BY CARTER GIEGERICH
Staff

Access to free and reduced-cost legal services for residents of the plateau and surrounding counties has taken a big step forward this month, as Pisgah Legal Services puts the finishing touches on its newest office next to the Highlands-Cashiers Hospital.

PLS serves low-income community members in need of legal aid on matters ranging from housing concerns to custody disputes, domestic violence prevention and immigration matters. Executive Director Jim Barrett said the organization hopes the plateau office will act as a hub for those in Jackson and Macon Counties in need of these services.

“We have immigration law services that are spread pretty thin across 18 counties, and then we have other services that help people get stable housing, stop domestic violence, increase their income and access healthcare,” Barrett said. “That’s why we expanded into Macon and Jackson Counties. We were able to do that because people on the plateau helped us raise a lot of money, and Highlands-Cashiers Health Foundation has made generous grant funding available.”

Barrett said the placement of the new office on the plateau is in part because of the requests from funders to have the office close by, and also by the availability of volunteer staff.

“We’re happy to be able to serve from the office in the plateau, because we can get a lot of volunteers – there are a lot of retired lawyers in the area,” Barrett said. “We also do most of our work over the phone, so people can still access us in the middle of the pandemic.”

The office, which is currently still operating remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, has a number of full-time staff members as well, several of whom have long-time ties to the plateau. Staff Attorney Patricia Caddell grew up in Cashiers, returning to her hometown in the mountains after law school to serve the community in which she spent her childhood.

“I’m really grateful for the opportunity to help the community I grew up in,” Caddell said. “I have lots of family and friends here, and when I left for law school I came back as soon as I could when this opportunity presented itself.”

The need for services on the plateau and the surrounding communities is great, Caddell said.

“There are quite a few things where people wind up representing themselves or just giving up and being defeated by the system,” she said. “A lot of those things relate to housing issues, and people being evicted because of the pandemic. There are a lot

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Vecinos secures \$100k grant for new services

BY CARTER GIEGERICH
Staff

In a year marked by setbacks, Vecinos Farmworker Health Program is continuing to grow and evolve to meet the needs of the Spanish-speaking community in Western North Carolina.

A few short months after rolling out a new, state-of-the-art mobile clinic designed to serve their current clientele, which at present consists entirely of Spanish-speaking farmworkers in Western North Carolina, Vecinos has announced plans to grow in a big way thanks to grants provided by the Dogwood Health Trust.

“What the funding is for, specifically, is a new initiative to expand our clinical services to any uninsured person in need of Spanish-language services,” said Marianne Martinez, executive director of the Vecinos Farmworker Health Program. “Currently, our services are only funded to serve farmworkers. This will expand our services significantly.”

The funds, provided by grants for COVID-19 relief and through the trust’s Racial Equity Grant program, total \$100,000. \$75,000 of that money will be disbursed over the course of two years.



Submitted photo

Vecinos’ mobile clinic has served many Spanish-speaking workers at local tree farms this year.

For a program like Vecinos, Martinez said that type of funding can be a game-changer.

“It gives us confidence to move forward with a project like this,” she said. “The last thing we want is to lay all the

legwork, work with partners over the course of a year and then turn around and say, ‘Oh no, we don’t have funding next year.’ Having those multi-year

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CHHS Hero Pet

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Fishes and Loaves offers free Christmas meals

The dates for this year's Fishes and Loaves Food Pantry "Christmas Dinner Distri-bration" are Thursday, Dec. 17 and Monday, Dec. 21 from 4:30-6:30 p.m. at the Food Pantry located at 249 Frank Allen Road.

Larry Morris, Executive Director of the Food Pantry, said "Distri-bration" is a combination of "distribution" and "celebration."

"The Christmas holiday is a time of joy, family, food, and celebration of this blessed season, and that celebration is in every bag of our Christmas Dinner," he said.

Each bag has a full holiday dinner, either a turkey breast or ham, stuffing mix, mac and cheese, potatoes, yams, onions, green bean casserole ingredients, a bread mix, cranberry sauce, and a pie to top off the meal.

"The Food Pantry board has allocated our grants, recent food drives,

and financial donations to purchase these dinner ingredients through resources such as the MANNA Food Bank, Ingles discounts, and U.S. government programs," Morris said. "We want our receiving community to enjoy a wonderful Christmas meal. Each bag of food contains forty dollars worth of food. By not having to buy a holiday dinner, our receivers can pay for other essentials such as fuel, electricity, and gifts for their loved ones."

The Distri-bration is a no-contact, drive-by event with volunteers giving holiday dinner bags through car windows or into trunks.

"You do not have to be registered or a former Food Pantry recipient to receive a holiday meal," Morris said. "If you need an extra boost to fully enjoy this time of year, come to the Food Pantry's Distri-bration."



Submitted photo

The Cashiers Area Chamber of Commerce welcomed their newest members last week - Specialties Plus of NC.

"Specialties Plus of NC is beyond excited to be a part of the Cashiers Area Chamber. As a second-generation family owned company with over 30 years of service, community is a priority," The owners said in a release. "The surrounding area and mountains have been home to the company for over 20 years, after relocating the main office from the coast. We are here to help you find the perfect products to promote your business in a unique way. Eco products are our specialty; including washable paper bags, reusable drinkware, and even products infused with wheat to reduce plastic waste. Whether you are looking for tradeshow giveaways, client/employee gifting, apparel, or even awards, you could say that we have just about everything under the sun."

VECINOS

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funds helps us push forward."

According to Dogwood Health Trust's official announcement for the grant funding, the Racial Equity Grant program aims to provide funding to "historically underfunded organizations whose primary purpose is serving Black, indigenous and communities of color, and whose leadership is representative of the communities they serve."

Initially aiming to provide \$1 million in funding, the grants nearly tripled that goal, distributing \$2.8 million between 130 non-profits in Western North Carolina.

"One of our goals for the Racial Equity Community Grants was to recognize and support the great work and leadership already taking place in our region," said Dogwood Health Trust board member Jackie Simms in the announcement. "We're thrilled that we've been able to go beyond our original \$1 million allocation in order to support and shine a light on such a strong group of organizations and their efforts to create a more equitable system."

The expansion of services for Vecinos will provide expanded services to a much larger population than their current clientele, Martinez said. She said census estimates indicate there are between

7,000 and 10,000 spanish-speaking residents in the counties the organization serves, and those numbers are likely a conservative estimate of the actual Latinx community here.

"Right now we only serve between 800 and 1,000 people each year, and that's such a nominal number in comparison to the number of potential spanish speakers in the region," she said. "And then, when you think about the rate of uninsured people statewide being about 25 percent, that's the number of people we could potentially be serving."

The plans for expansion are still in the formative stages, Martinez said, with planning for new services currently underway.

"We are just in the baby steps, and we're still trying to plan for this with our board," she said. "This is all super new, but we'll be reaching out to others and pulling them into the conversation to make sure we're all on the same page and working together."

She said there are already some Spanish-language services available at other clinics in the area, including Blue Ridge Health, Appalachian Highlands Free Clinic and Community Care in Franklin. The addition of these services from Vecinos would bolster those offerings, however, and offer a level of focused care that doesn't currently exist.

"We don't want to repeat services - we want to complement what's go-

ing on already," Martinez said. "We're a unique service model that's really situated and poised to serve this population. While the other clinics do have Spanish-speaking staff, it's not their forte and no one clinic can serve the entire region's Spanish-speaking population."

The next step in growing the organization is ensuring there are enough trained staff members to serve the new clientele the group aims to serve.

"Strategic planning is a huge part right now, but we also have to make sure we have the staff to serve these people," Martinez said. "We're a small staff right now. We're also looking for new clinical space, and we hope to find something that's very cheap or free. There are also all the administrative costs that go along with that."

Highlands Cashiers Health Foundation
www.HCHealthFND.org

PLS

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of others, too – we're able to help people with things like custody and divorce, and quite a few people in this area are going without solving those issues or without having those services, or just the availability of legal advice."

PLS offers free services to households with incomes at or below 125 percent of the poverty level. Barrett said he recognizes two distinct populations their services might be used by here on the plateau, each with their own unique needs.

"Kids on free and reduced lunch make up about half the school population – that alone tells you there are a lot of low-income families off the beaten path on the plateau," Barrett said. "Then there are the people who have to commute to work on the plateau. A lot of people working there can't afford to live there, and you can see people coming and going in the morning and afternoon."

It would be almost impossible for many of these individuals to make the trip to a larger town during the day to seek services on a regular basis, Barrett said.

"You think about groundskeepers, wait staff, services workers. Frankly, the vacationers depend on them but they need to be able to get services if they need it. Nobody wants these workers to be experiencing domestic violence," he said. "If they need a lawyer for something, especially something critical, and they're working on the plateau, they couldn't easily drive to Franklin or Sylva to see a lawyer."

For Caddell, the new office is a sign that people on the plateau haven't been overlooked or left behind by larger cities and towns.

"There were very few attorneys in Cashiers when I was growing up, and being an attorney you think you need to live in a bigger city," she said. "But the fact is, these services should be available to people in not just Cashiers and Highlands, but all of Jackson and Macon Counties."

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