

Union County Fire assists with deadly blaze in Towns



The deadly fire at Leisure Meadow Lane in Hiawassee destroyed the home and killed two people. Photo/Submitted

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HIAWASSEE – The Union County Fire Department assisted Towns County Fire & Rescue on a mutual aid call to douse a structure fire that claimed the lives of two people in the early morning hours of Friday, Jan. 8. The cause of the fire remains under investigation.

A third person was taken to Chatuge Regional Hospital for medical observation and released later that day.

Authorities believe the victims lost to the fire were Sylvia Yi-anaridis and James Henry Dietrich of the Leisure Woods subdivision, though a final determination of identity is being conducted by the Medical Examiner's Office of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

"The Towns County Fire Department requested our help to investigate this fire which completely destroyed a double-wide mobile home," Insurance and Safety Fire Commissioner John F. King said Monday. "Upon arriving at the scene, authorities found one deceased male and one deceased female. One additional male escaped with minor injuries."

"State and local authorities will release the identities of the deceased when they become available."

The fire is under investigation by Commissioner King's State Fire Investigations Unit, the Towns County Sheriff's Office and Towns County Fire. Residents with helpful information on the case should call the State Fire Investigations Unit at 1-800-656-2298.

Towns County Fire Chief Harold Copeland said his department was able to have someone

on the scene within five minutes of being dispatched by Towns County E-911 about a quarter past 5 a.m. Friday.

The area is a more secluded part of the county off Owl Creek Road that doesn't have fire hydrants, which generally makes firefighting more difficult, as water must be manually trucked to a blaze.

Fortunately, Towns County has cultivated good working relationships with nearby counties, so Union County and Clay County, North Carolina, fire units responded to the scene to offer mutual aid.

"Upon arrival, the first volunteer there reported (the home being) 50-60% involved (in flames)," Chief Copeland said. "It was super-hot, melted a couple of my guys' helmets down as they went into the door as far as they could to apply water."

Copeland described the fire as "brutal" and said it took more than an hour to knock down, after which he contacted Holcomb Construction of Hiawassee to bring in equipment to remove roofing and other debris to excavate the home and locate the fire victims.

As always, he's grateful for everyone involved, including the State Fire Marshal's Office, Towns County Sheriff's Office, Towns County EMS, Union and Clay County fire departments, and the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC for quickly disconnecting power to the property.

For his part, Union County Fire Chief David Dyer said his department was mutually appreciative of the agreement that exists between the two departments.

"The call was dispatched as a fire with entrapment," Dyer said. "These are the most stress-

ful and demanding calls. They change your focus from fighting fire to rescue, which is a difficult job. It takes a lot of firefighters to perform a rescue.

"Towns County had just about every firefighter they have on that incident. They activated mutual aid with Union County Fire to provide more personnel and a tanker. We also covered their county while they were working."

"We were very happy to provide mutual aid assistance. The mutual aid agreements that we have in place are essential for small departments where personnel is limited."

And of course, Chief Copeland said he would like to express gratitude for his own Towns County Fire & Rescue Department.

"Engine 1, Tanker 1, Engine 4, Engine 5, and Engine 2 all responded (from Towns County)," Chief Copeland said. "I have to always give kudos to our department. I can't say enough about how our volunteers performed – wonderful as always. I'm very proud of them."

"I want to thank Towns County EMS for transporting the subject that was in the house. A second med unit came to assist in case anything happened to us, but we had no injuries, and we're blessed there."

Towns County Fire & Rescue is a combination career/paid-on-call department consisting of six stations and approximately 60 members.

All stations are equipped with engines that carry a minimum of 1,000 gallons of water, and all engines are equipped with a 1,250 gallons-per-minute pump or greater. Each station has a tanker truck to accompany the engines.

Vaccine Signups...from Page 1A



Barnett vaccinated Jesse Miller at Chatuge Regional Hospital Jan. 7. Miller contracts with the hospital to provide Electromyographical Studies and Verve Conduction Velocity tests. Photo/Submitted

more appointments available. I would suggest that residents check the site a few times a day to see if appointments have been added."

Beginning Jan. 11, those eligible to receive the vaccine are health care workers, long-term care staff and residents, police officers, firefighters, first responders, and people aged 65 and up. A wider range of individuals will become vaccine eligible as more supply comes online.

"Vaccines are for residents who live or work in the counties that comprise District 2, (including Union County)," Public Health said of its vaccine doses Jan. 6. "Vaccines will be given by appointment ONLY. Walk-ins will not be accepted."

Continuing, "If you have insurance, please bring your card. Insurance will help pay to offset the cost for administering the vaccine. There will be no cost to anyone to get vaccinated."

Additionally, Northeast Georgia residents aged 65 and older can try scheduling an appointment to receive a COVID vaccine at one of several events hosted by Northeast Georgia Health System.

"Seven COVID-19 Vaccine Clinic events have been planned through the end of January, along with follow-up events at which participants will receive their second dose," the Health System announced Saturday.

Appointments are required and walk-ins will not be accepted, with event dates/locations being Jan. 11, 14 and 16 in Oakwood, Jan. 18 in Dawsonville, Jan. 23 in Winder, Jan. 27 in Gainesville and Jan. 30 in Toccoa. To schedule an appointment, visit nghs.com/vaccine-registration.

"We are offering as many appointments as possible with the vaccine supply and staffing resources we have available," Bobby Norris of Northeast Georgia Physicians Group said. "We will add more appointments – at more locations – as soon as we can. In the meantime, we appreciate everyone's patience."

Local pharmacies are expected to offer the COVID-19 vaccine to the general public this year, though there's no timeline at present as to when those will be available.

Doctor's offices are also eligible to give the vaccine while supplies last, though currently, only Synergy Health of Hiawassee is offering vaccinations to the public, based on state eligibility guidelines.

To sign up there, visit <http://www.synergymd.org>

that we need to be serving," Sheriff Henderson said.

SARS-CoV-2 has been linked to more than 350,000 American deaths and much illness since its emergence a year ago, and those administering the vaccine are glad to finally have something they are hopeful will make a meaningful dent in the numbers.

"It feels good to actually have a solution to our problem," Clinical Manager Savannah Kendall of Synergy Health said that Tuesday. "We're able to work towards not just being reactive to patients coming in with COVID but being proactive in saying we have something that can resolve."

"Hopefully, we can find a resolution to COVID and start protecting the community."

Interest in the vaccine is incredibly high here, which makes sense, as Union and Towns counties are retirement communities consisting of a disproportionate number of senior citizens, who are the most at risk for death and hospitalization.

COVID-19 prevalence remains elevated all over the U.S., including in this region, and many people have placed their hopes in the vaccine, which has yet to be formally authorized by the Food and Drug Administration and deploys a technology that's new in terms of use in humans.

As previously reported, there are several known side effects associated with COVID-19 vaccination, such as fever, headache, and rarer but more serious complications, though the most common side effect has been injection site soreness.

People will need to weigh the risks individually and in consultation with health care providers, but so far, for the most vulnerable to severe illness, many doctors believe the risks of an emergency use authorized vaccine are unlikely to be greater than the risks of COVID itself.

As far as COVID-19 testing goes, the local Health Department is no longer holding daily clinics to allow the general public to receive free testing.

Until further notice, testing through the local Health Department will be strictly for symptomatic first responders, school employees and court system personnel who make an appointment.

District 2 Public Health is still offering COVID-19 testing for free to the general public at 2500 Allen Creek Drive in Gainesville. This site operates Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays from 8:30 a.m. to 12 p.m. by appointment only.

People can make an appointment by contacting the Call Center at 1-888-426-5073. Center hours are Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays from 7:30 am to 5 p.m., and Tuesdays from 7:30 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Local testing is also available via doctor's offices and other health care providers, though charges may apply.

Community members ask for larger stimulus checks

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
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As the \$600 COVID-19 stimulus checks continue to make their way into people's bank accounts across the country, many folks have been wondering: why is the amount so low?

Donna McGrath of Union County said she felt the \$2,000 checks previously proposed should be approved so that people can actually use the money to cover their living expenses.

"I don't know how I feel about this entire stimulus thing," McGrath said at Meeks Park Jan. 1. "The \$600 is nice, and I am happy to see something coming out of our government to help people who haven't been able to work that much during all of this."

"I don't think that \$600 is enough, though, and it doesn't make a lot of sense to me that we would be getting so little when we got \$1,200 earlier in (2020). This has gone on longer than they said, and they give us less. It just feels wrong."

Michelle King of North Carolina agreed, saying that not only should the stimulus be higher but that the government was holding out on people needing the money most.

"I haven't met anyone who is happy about the stimulus," King said while walking the Blairsville Square Jan. 2. "I heard that they are working on \$2,000, but I don't see that happening."

"I am conservative, and even I think that we deserve that money. They are holding that from us, but people really need it. Have you seen the people that are struggling with rent? With food for their children and themselves? We can't work right now, and businesses are closing."



Meeks Park remains a great local alternative to staying home amid COVID-19, especially since health professionals don't think the virus spreads easily outdoors. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

"Something needs to be done. This is not something that we can just fix, and the people really need this. My family needs this, and we want the help."

Bryan Luna of White County said the economy sure could use the stimulus, as businesses have been closing and people are still struggling to find jobs or get back to work due to lingering effects of COVID-19.

"I am not one that keeps up with the government that much, but I do know the economy, and it is not good," Luna said at Lucky's Taqueria & Cantina Jan. 2. "In my family, we have had a few people lose good jobs, and they still haven't gone back to work. Their companies just decided to let them go because of cutting costs, and they have had to pull unemployment."

"You'd be crazy to say these checks aren't needed and people can just save and be smart with their money. The

reality is that people are losing jobs, and the bills aren't going anywhere."

"Your lights and water don't care that you got laid off. That is why we need to be supporting people, so they can actually live."

People can check the status of their stimulus payments by visiting IRS.gov/Coronavirus/Get-My-Payment.

Some people have been having issues with a "Status Not Available" message on the Get My Payment IRS portal. People who filed their taxes via TurboTax last year may have gotten this issue straightened out already, but others may have to wait a bit longer.

"If (Get My Payment) shows 'Payment Status #2 – Not Available,' then you will not receive a second Economic Impact Payment and instead you need to claim the Recovery Rebate Credit on your 2020 Tax Return," according to the IRS.