

# Coronavirus...from Page 1A

closing daycares, schools or school districts as early as tomorrow through the next two weeks,” Kemp said on March 12. “In addition, county and local governments should consider what closures might be appropriate that do not affect essential services.”

All local school athletics are also on hold for the time being, following a recommendation by the Georgia High School Association that “all member schools suspend spring sports activities until further notice.”

“Union County Schools has canceled all field trips, athletics, extracurricular activities, and the use of all district facilities effective immediately until further notice,” Superintendent John Hill said in a statement Friday.

Most student work will utilize online instruction, with some younger and other students being provided take-home paper assignments. March 16 was an in-service day for faculty and staff to prepare for upcoming online instruction, which started on Tuesday, March 17, and will run at least through Friday, March 20.

“We will reassess the situation as it evolves to make further decisions at the end of next week (March 20),” Hill said. “More information will be forthcoming to support families needing food service. The vision statement of Union County Schools is ‘Success for ALL,’ and we are committed to ensuring our families are supported during this time.”

Of course, Hill and other area superintendents did not reach their decisions to close schools lightly, doing so only after consulting with the above-mentioned organizations and individuals, including State Superintendent Richard Woods, as well as public guidance offered recently by President Donald Trump.

“The information that was provided ... indicated that proactive school closures help flatten the bell curve of infection, allowing health care providers to care for medically fragile and elderly individuals who are affected greatly by this particular virus,” Hill said. “Extensive

scientific research supports the president’s and governor’s recommendations.”

Hill and his staff met with school board members Friday to brief them on the district’s plans moving forward. In the statement released by his office later that day, Hill said he and his staff appreciated everyone’s support during this time.

“As school leaders, we have to make hard decisions, keeping the entire school and community in mind based on guidance from local, state and national leaders,” Hill said. “Please be patient and keep in mind the health and wellbeing of ALL members of Union County.”

“Challenging times are when we need to come together and protect one another. Please join us in uniting for the greater good of our community, state and nation.”

Mountain Education Charter High School announced a similar policy last Thursday to institute online-only instruction starting March 16 to slow the potential spread of the virus, citing Gov. Kemp’s press conference and advice from Pioneer RESA.

“On Thursday, March 19, MECHS will re-evaluate the conditions of the local area and make a decision on site closures for the following week,” MECHS Superintendent Dr. Wayne Lovell said.

And while young people don’t seem to be at particular risk from the disease, again, the closings are aimed at preventing children and staff from becoming virus carriers who might inadvertently infect vulnerable community members such as elderly and/or sick relatives with COVID-19.

The closings pose a significant hardship to households with two working parents, but health experts believe it will very likely help to limit the spread of the disease, which the CDC has described as inevitable.

“Ultimately, we expect we will see community spread in this country,” said Dr. Nancy Messonnier, director of the CDC’s National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, in a recent media briefing.

Continuing, she said, “It’s

not so much a question of if this will happen anymore but rather more a question of exactly when this will happen and how many people in this country will have severe illness.”

Local officials, including Emergency Management Agency Director David Dyer and Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, are keeping in touch with all local departments as well as the Georgia Department of Public Health, which in turn is coordinating with the CDC to get the best information out to the public.

“The Union County Government wants to inform everyone that we have been in contact with the Union County EMA, city government, emergency services partners, and private organizations concerning the coronavirus COVID-19,” Paris said Friday. “All organizations have attended conference calls to stay informed and to exchange information.”

“We are recommending that everyone follow the guidelines provided by the CDC and Department of Public Health. Please visit their websites at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) and [www.dph.georgia.gov](http://www.dph.georgia.gov) for more information and guidelines.

“This is a fluid situation with information changing by the hour. We want everyone to understand the decisions being made are not made lightly. They are made with the latest information possible and with the best interest of the people of Union County.”

For updates on potential decisions made regarding county services, monitor the “Union County, Georgia Government” Facebook page and [unioncountyga.gov](http://unioncountyga.gov).

The Union County Senior Center will be closed at least through March 20, but importantly, hot and frozen meal deliveries to homebound seniors will continue.

“We are closing to keep our seniors well,” the Senior Center said Friday. “We will follow the school plans and re-evaluate concerning the next week. If you have any questions or concerns, please call us at 706-439-6105.”

The Union County Recreation Department has canceled all of its activities until further notice, with baseball, softball and T-ball seasons being postponed.

In-person classes held at Rec Department facilities have also been canceled indefinitely “due to concerns of this virus,” though a list of available online classes can be found at the “Union County Recreation Department” Facebook page.

The Union County Sheriff’s Office has instituted a policy outlining visits to the jail, noting that visitations will continue, but that visitors who are ill or presenting with any of the known symptoms will not be allowed entry to the facility.

Available video visitations are being encouraged at this time, and visitors and inmates will not be allowed to touch during visitations.

“Due to the concern for our visitors, inmates and staff, the jail will be implementing (these measures) to ensure we can allow visitation to continue for as long as possible,” the Sheriff’s Office said. “If there

is a concern for the wellbeing of visitors, inmates or staff, the Union County Jail will stop all visitations until further notice.”

The Sheriff’s Office itself will continue normal operations and emergency responses, and a statement regarding the new jail visitation policy in light of the coronavirus can be found in full on the “Union County-Georgia Sheriff’s Office” Facebook page.

Blue Ridge Mountain EMC issued a statement on March 12 announcing an updated Pandemic Response Plan and creation of an internal task force “to address increasing concerns and plan for mitigating the effects of the coronavirus on the co-op and our surrounding communities.”

The EMC has outlined a number of potential steps it may take in the event of an area outbreak, including closing headquarters to the public, operating with reduced crews, and having employees work from home, all in the interest of keeping “the power grid functioning 100 percent.”

“We realize these actions will likely affect how we serve you, our members, on a daily basis,” the EMC said. “However, we will remain available by phone and email, and we will certainly respond if power outages occur.”

Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger took the unprecedented step of canceling the March 24 Presidential Preference Primary Election over the weekend, to include the last week of early voting, citing coronavirus concerns.

All votes already cast will still count, and people who have not had the chance to vote in the Presidential Preference Primary can do so during the next election, the May 19 General Primary.

Possible considerations for canceling the March 24 election were the community closings of public places like schools that were to house polling precincts, as well as concerns over the wellbeing of poll workers, as the average poll worker in Georgia is an older adult.

No COVID-19 cases had been confirmed in Union County as of press time, though there were 121 cases reported in Georgia by Monday afternoon, with nearly all states having confirmed cases of the virus, according to the CDC.

“This virus is capable of spreading easily and sustainably from person to person based on the available data,” Dr. Messonnier said. “The report of the World Health Organization mission to China describes the virus as being highly contagious.”

“And there’s essentially no immunity against this virus in the population because it’s a new virus. Based on this, it’s fair to say that, as the trajectory of the outbreak continues, many people in the United States will at some point in time either this year or next be exposed to this virus, and there’s a good chance many will become sick.

“But again, based on what we know about this virus, we do not expect most people to develop serious illness.”

Health officials are asking people to implement the same precautions for this virus as they do during particularly rough flu seasons, committing to regular handwashing, staying at home while sick, cleaning surfaces and objects with household disinfectants, covering coughs and sneezes, etc.

Still other recommendations are being advanced, such as increased levels of social distancing and avoidance of crowded spaces by healthy people, and the forgoing of handshakes as well as unnecessary travel, especially for at-risk demographics, like the elderly and people of any age who have severe underlying health conditions and/or compromised immune systems.

The CDC issued new guidance Sunday asking event organizers to “cancel or postpone in-person events that consist of 50 people or more throughout the United States” for the next eight weeks.

These measures definitely run counter to the way Americans are used to living their lives, but it’s important to keep in mind that these recommendations are all being made in the name of prevention until the threat subsides, and Dr. Messonnier has urged the public not to panic.

“This is a time for people to prepare for what they might need to do, but not a time for people to clear out the shelves,” she said. “I really want to focus on the United States and the families at highest risk, because in the setting where it’s really clear that it is older Americans who are at the highest risk right now, we want to make sure that they’re taking every precaution to prepare themselves so that

if there is more widespread transmission, they can stick close to home.”

As of press time, the number of confirmed cases worldwide had cleared 175,000, and COVID-19 had been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization, which simply means it has become geographically widespread.

There’s currently no vaccine or treatment, according to the CDC, though multiple treatments, including several vaccine candidates, are reportedly in the works.

Infectious disease specialist Dr. Amesh Adalja with the Center for Health Security at Johns Hopkins University said recently that there will likely be a viable vaccine in the next 12 to 18 months, and that a one-time vaccination with perhaps a follow-up booster could potentially protect people from COVID-19 for life.

For now, the CDC is saying that the best way to prevent illness is to avoid exposure to the virus, which is still thought to spread mainly from person-to-person, “between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet) through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes.”

“These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs,” the CDC said.

Due to COVID-19’s relative ease of transmission, one of the most important initiatives in mitigating the risks associated with the disease is what health experts are referring to as “flattening the curve” of the spread, as mentioned by Superintendent Hill above.

This flattening concept has to do with preventing the rapid transmission of the virus in order to balance out the number of sick people over time so that the health care system does not experience too much strain with an overabundance of cases hitting local hospitals all at once.

To accomplish this, the CDC and other health organizations, including the Georgia Department of Public Health, are asking people to institute the best hygiene practices described herein.

For more information on COVID-19 prevention, visit <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/index.html>.

Many health experts are looking to the massive testing efforts being undertaken in South Korea as a hopeful indicator of the overall mortality rate of the disease, which is proving to be around 0.7 percent there – well below the 3-4 percent reported by the World Health Organization.

Such a disparity in outcomes between affected countries is likely due to the fact that data coming out of South Korea is so much more extensive than data available from any other area.

As of last week, South Korea was reportedly testing upwards of 20,000 people a day, with only 4 percent of the tests coming back positive and the number of newly diagnosed cases dropping steadily since the end of February.

And it’s very likely that not all people who come down with COVID-19 are being tested in South Korea, meaning the actual death rate for this coronavirus is probably lower than the 0.7 percent among confirmed cases, according to Dr. Adalja, who is also urging people not to panic.

Back home in the U.S., President Trump addressed the nation on March 11 in an attempt to inject calm into an increasingly chaotic international and domestic situation.

In his address, he introduced a sweeping new travel ban on movement to and from the European Union, with exceptions for returning Americans already abroad.

The president again addressed the nation on March 13 to declare a national emergency in order to ease testing/treatment regulations and make available \$50 billion to help states combat the disease, to fund, among other things, a public/private partnership to begin widespread drive-through coronavirus testing, which has proven to be extremely beneficial in South Korea.

Soon, drive-through testing will be conducted in concert with Walmart, CVS, Target and Walgreens providing parking lot space for the tests, and several commercial laboratories will perform the actual testing.

Congress was expected to pass a major bill by press time, to be signed by the president, to aid Americans financially impacted by the virus, and the Trump administration is

pursuing other initiatives to assist businesses and individuals in the weeks and months ahead, including a number of economic measures designed to shore up markets battered by anxieties over COVID-19.

Market uncertainty around the globe is being driven largely by uncertainty over the new virus, including its rate of infection and how best to contain it, and as such, demand for certain products and services has dramatically decreased – think of the travel, energy and entertainment industries.

Furthermore, global supply chains are being disrupted, as large manufacturing sectors have taken big hits to their production capabilities, most notably in China, which has undergone massive government-imposed quarantines in recent weeks in an effort to contain the spread of the virus, though experts believe all economic distress to be temporary in nature.

Here in Georgia, Gov. Brian Kemp has created a Coronavirus Task Force, which has been coordinating with the Georgia Emergency Management Agency to respond to the growing number of Peach State cases.

He has also established what is effectively a state-level quarantine site consisting of seven emergency mobile units at Hard Labor Creek State Park in Morgan County.

“This site was specifically chosen for its isolation from the general public and ability to house mobile units in the short term,” Georgia EMA Director Homer Bryson said last week.

An individual from Cherokee County who tested positive for COVID-19 became the first person to be housed at the site, as “the individual was not able to isolate at their primary residence and was not in critical condition requiring any hospital admittance,” the Governor’s Office said.

“The isolated site at Hard Labor Creek State Park is closed to public access and closely monitored 24 hours a day, seven days a week by state law enforcement,” the Governor’s Office continued.

Mirroring the president’s national emergency declaration, on Friday, Kemp announced a state-level emergency – the first public health emergency ever declared in Georgia – intended to ease the burden of responding to the virus situation moving forward, effective March 14.

“At this time, it is appropriate for faith-based organizations and similar entities to consider cancellation of public events and services,” he added.

Kemp also issued an executive order Saturday calling up as many as 2,000 Georgia National Guard troops to state active duty to address COVID-19 in the state.

The order came at the request GEMA Director Bryson to make Guard troops available to assist with “COVID-19 mitigation and critical services, including the transfer of Georgians currently at Dobbins Air Reserve Base to their homes,” and to be available to communities “to ensure the steady supply of medical equipment, food, shelter, or related materials.”

“The Georgia National Guard is already assisting with the transfer of 31 Georgians – formerly passengers on the Grand Princess cruise ship – from Dobbins Air Reserve Base to their homes (March 14) for isolation and monitoring by Department of Public Health officials,” Kemp said.

In other state news, Lt. Gov. Jeff Duncan and State House Speaker David Ralston decided last week to suspend the 2020 Legislative Session of the Georgia General Assembly to “resume at a future date to be determined.”

“We continue to urge calm and appropriate responses to the coronavirus situation,” Duncan said. “However, the current environment demands that we take additional preventative action.”

“Speaker Ralston and I are working diligently to ensure that, at the appropriate time, the

General Assembly resumes its critically important work.”

Georgia is set to receive \$14,786,284.50 from the CDC, to be awarded to state and local partners to support the COVID-19 response as part of the \$8.3 billion package passed by Congress and signed by the president recently to combat the spread of the disease.

In addition, state legislators have greenlighted Gov. Kemp’s request for an additional \$100 million in state funding to go toward coronavirus response efforts.

For more COVID-19 information, visit [gov.georgia.gov](http://gov.georgia.gov) and [coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html](http://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html).