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Teamwork helps schools in fight against pandemic

By Jimmy Espy
EDITOR

In February of 2021, like the rest of us, Samantha Burt didn't know what to expect from the COVID-19 virus. But as lead nurse for Murray County Schools, Burt knew she had a lot to learn and only a little time to learn it.

"If you had told me it was going to be like this, I would never have believed it," Burt told The Times recently. "I don't think anybody would have."

A 2002 graduate of Murray County High School, Burt oversees a staff of six, a registered nurse (RN) and five licensed practical nurses (LPNs), which provides on-site healthcare services to all 11 Murray County public schools.

The pandemic has been a major challenge.

When the school system suddenly switched to distance learning last fall, Burt and her co-workers were immediately faced with a new environment. Instead of meeting students at school and helping them in the traditional manner, they had to change methods.

"One of the things we did was set up at stations where they were distributing meals," said Burt. "We could check temperatures and ask them about

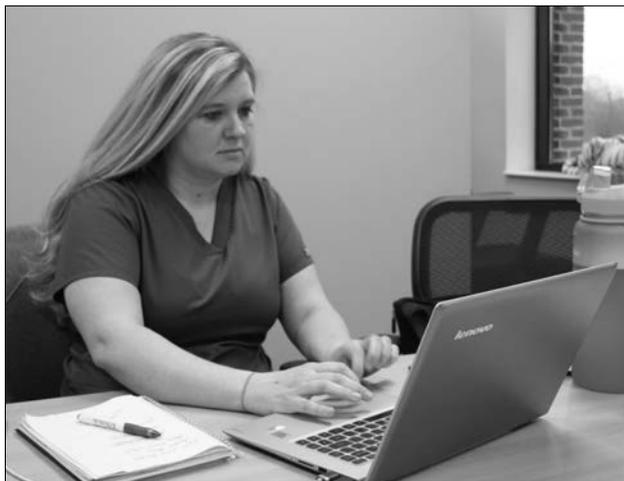


PHOTO BY JIMMY ESPY

Samantha Burt is the lead nurse of the Murray County schools.

symptoms. We also called students at home to check on them."

Over the summer, Burt joined with other school officials to plan how they would handle the return to the classrooms last fall.

"At first, we met every Wednesday and then more often to plan for the school year," she said. "Nobody knew what to expect. We met with nurses from other schools like Pickens and Gilmer and bounced ideas off each other."

"The main goal," Burt said, "was to keep kids in school."

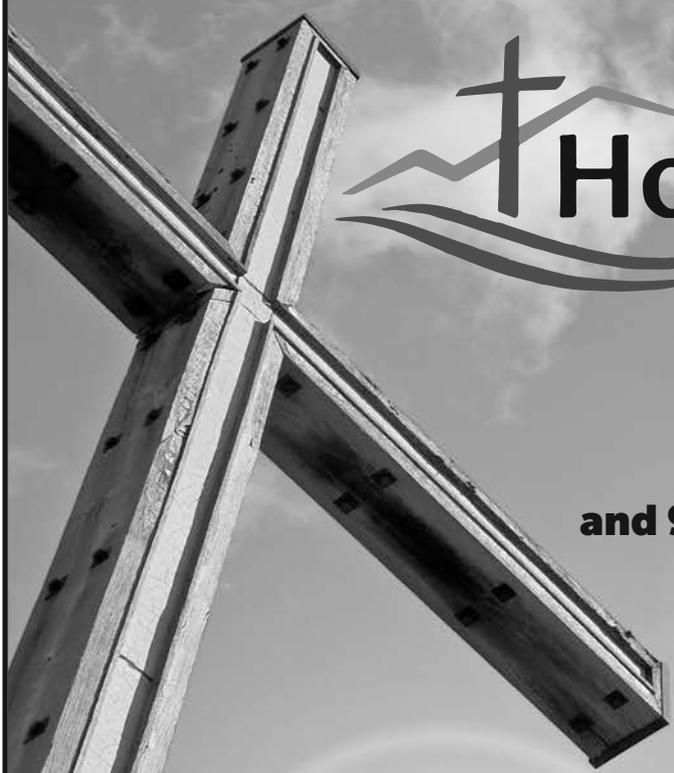
Recognizing the need for additional manpower, School Superintendent Steve Loughridge recommended hiring additional nurses. The board agreed.

The school medical staff now consists of registered nurses (RNs) Burt and Brittany Hobbs and licensed practical nurses (LPNs) Tiffany Ledford, Katie Sanford, Shannon Saylor, Laura Rymer and Leah Gedeonov.

Burt said she focuses on schools on "the south end" while Hobbs monitors "the north end."

Each nurse has two schools where they meet with students in clinics located in the schools. Clinical aids are also part of the program. Burt works at Spring Place Elementary and Coker Elementary. Ledford is at Murray County High and with the

SEE **BURT**, PAGE 4





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BURT: Keeping kids in the classroom has been the goal for school nurses

FROM PAGE 3

Ledford is at Murray County High and with the pre-k program. Sanford is at Chatsworth Elementary and Gladden Middle School. Saylor and Hobbs split Bagley Middle School and Woodlawn Elementary. Rymer is a North Murray High School and Eton Elementary. Gedeonov is at Northwest Elementary and Pleasant Valley Innovative School.

School officials also provided funding for additional medical supplies, including masks and personal protective equipment, and extra cleaning supplies. Isolation rooms have been set up at every school so that anyone showing symptoms can be kept away from other people while waiting to go home.

While they continue to face the normal health issues a school nurse has to deal with, the pandemic remains the 800-pound gorilla in the room.

One of the most time-consuming tasks faced by the nurses is contact tracing. When a student or staff member is identified as having COVID-19, a nurse calls and gathers as much information as

they can about any contacts that person has made anywhere they've been. Contact is defined as having been within six feet for 15 minutes or more.

"We build a list and then contact families with kids in schools and explain to them that they are in quarantine and what that means," Burt said. "We explain how they can get meals and about distance learning."

Conversations with students and their family members can be difficult. Burt became emotional while discussing the subject.

"It's been a struggle at times," she said. "We try to remember that they (student and their families) are very frustrated. It's very sad for us to have to tell kids they can't participate in things that are very important to them. Calling and giving someone the bad news is the hard part. For some of them, school is their safe place. Their friends are at school. They get fed at school."

She worries that the public doesn't understand that school nurses have to deliver the bad news.

"We really do care about the kids," she said. "We love the students and want them in school."

Burt said school officials have been very support-

ive of the nurses. She also gives school leadership a lot of credit for reacting to the pandemic aggressively.

"I think the Murray County school system has done a lot of good things for the kids," she said. "I'm proud of what this system has accomplished."

She also praises teachers.

"Teachers are doing an amazing job," she said. "I don't think the kids are falling behind."

She is also pleased with the teamwork and cooperation she's seen between teachers, counselors, social workers and with organizations like Georgia HOPE, Healthy Families, the Department of Public Health and AdventHealth Murray.

Burt is optimistic that the county might be turning the corner as infection rates and quarantine numbers have gone down in recent weeks. She hopes that the return to face-to-face instruction for the full week, which started Feb. 22, will proceed smoothly. But she's also wary.

"We will be watching closely to see what happens," she said. "People are tired of COVID and are ready for it to be over. I know they want the students to be back in the classroom and so do we."



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Murray EMS busy on the front lines of pandemic fight

By Jimmy Espy
EDITOR

Doug Douthitt is tired but optimistic.

Wrestling with the COVID-19 pandemic for almost a year has taken its toll, but the 35-year veteran of Murray EMS is hopeful that things may be getting better in Murray County.

“The numbers have improved in the last few weeks,” said Douthitt, who is deputy director of Murray EMS. “ICUs have opened up. At one time, 75 percent of the calls we got were related to COVID. That number is down to about 20 percent now.”

“Our staff is tired,” said Douthitt. “Our people, like a lot of people in healthcare, have worked very hard for a long time.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has put extra demands on EMS personnel.

“Our call volume has been high and the COVID cases require more time and more care,” Douthitt said. “Time spent on calls has definitely gone up.”

A shortage of ICU bed space in local hospitals during the worst stages of the pandemic sometimes required Murray EMS to ferry patients to hospitals in North Carolina and Tennessee.



PHOTO BY JIMMY ESPY

From left, Anthony Cronon, Doug Douthitt and Christon Peden of Murray EMS.

The protective gear worn by EMS personnel was vital to protecting employees, but it added to their discomfort, fatigue and stress. That gear includes a mask, gown, gloves and eye protection.

Murray EMS employs 40 people, including 19

full-time workers. Some of those workers have had to deal with COVID themselves, which puts additional strain on the employees who have to fill in.

Maintaining coverage of the community and protecting EMS employees simultaneously has been difficult. Douthitt believes his department has answered that challenge.

“We have very strict policy on protective gear,” Douthitt said. “We fog the trucks after every COVID patient. We do a lot of deep cleaning. We take those precautions very seriously.”

“At no time have we ever dropped coverage,” he said. “We’ve paid overtime to cover shifts. It has been exhausting at times, but I can’t say enough about how the staff has stepped up. I am very proud of the way the staff has served our community.”

The pandemic has also put a strain on the Murray EMS budget.

Personnel costs have been higher and so have the costs of safety materials like masks, gloves and gowns.

“The cost of personal protective equipment was astronomical for awhile,” said Douthitt. “The supply chain has started to catch up now, but costs were very high for some PPE, if you could get it at all.”

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Important work goes on behind the scenes at HMC

By Jimmy Espy

EDITOR

The COVID-19 pandemic has meant a lot more work for some of the behind-the-scenes people in health care. They don't get much attention, but their contributions to the well being of patients is absolutely vital.

Shea Crow, of Chatsworth, has been working in the laboratory at Hamilton Medical Center in Dalton for more than 20 years. The daily demands of her job have always kept her busy but never more than since the pandemic began to work its way into Northwest Georgia.

"Initially, it wasn't that bad," Crow said. "In the beginning, it was kind of slow, but once it hit, we became very, very busy. We had one month this summer — I don't remember which one — that was the busiest month ever in the lab. We definitely have had to be a lot more productive."

Crow and her co-workers have had to deal with their traditional testing, for things like the flu and strep throat, while adding the considerable additional workload that came with the pandemic.

"It can get a little stressful at times," she said.



PHOTO BY HAMILTON MEDICAL CENTER

Shea Crow, of Chatsworth, has worked in the lab at Hamilton Medical Center for more than 20 years.

"But when you work with a really good group of

people, when everybody works together, it's not too bad."

Crow said the hospital has acquired new equipment, including an analyzer dedicated to COVID-19 testing. The new technology has helped productivity. For instance, the new analyzer can handle up to 94 samples at one time, taking about 90 minutes to complete the analysis. Older equipment can handle far fewer samples.

Crow mentioned that the laboratory remains open on all three shifts, helping get test results completed as quickly as possible.

Safety precautions already in place before the pandemic have been beneficial, according to Crow. Lab workers wear masks and lab coats, and when dealing with swabs, they work behind a shield.

Crow is proud of the job the lab has been doing. "I don't think a lot of people realize that what we do in the laboratory helps the doctor make a diagnosis," she said. "There's a lot of work to do in a lab. We have to maintain the analyzers, keep inventory, do surveys ... all that before we even get to do the patient work."

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How to spot developmental delays in children

The challenges of the last year have meant that children needed to play and learn in different ways than usual. Children have missed out on regular play dates, time with groups at the park or indoor playgrounds, group sports and birthday parties. Depending on the family situation and local restrictions, they have spent less time socializing and learning in daycares and preschools. And many have missed time with aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents. These changes may make some developmental delays easier to miss, and families need to regularly take time to check their child's development at home and with their primary care provider.



Emily Brandt, MD

their age.

* **Social:** Adults often let children lead when they play together while playing with other children pushes them to learn to share or be flexible. Older or younger brothers and sisters may not be interested in playing in the same way or with the same toys which can lead to frustration. And spending much of the day watching

videos or playing video games can limit how a child learns to interact with others.

* **Motor:** Playing on playgrounds is a great way to learn climbing, balance and swinging. As families miss outings, it can be easy to miss if a child is not able to keep up or struggling to learn new skills.

AREAS TO WATCH

* **Speech:** Parents are often the best at interpreting their child's speech and may not realize that other people have trouble understanding their child. They often know what their child means with just a look or a cry. While this is a special connection, it can make it harder to notice that some children may not be developing their speech the way they need to for

WAYS TO HELP

* **Speech:**
* Remind your child to use their words to ask for what they want rather than just crying or pointing.

* Talk about what your child is doing, how they are playing, and what you are doing. This helps to increase both their vocabulary and interaction.

* During video chats with family,

ask how much of the child's speech they can understand.

* **Social:**

* Make regular time to play with your child, joining in their pretend play, doing crafts together, and playing games.

* Practice taking turns during play time.

* Watch the types of toys your child enjoys and whether they are able to pretend with you.

* Spend time looking for specific things to praise about your child like how they give hugs, help, color and all of the things that make them special.

* **Motor:**

* Find ways to exercise at home like dancing together with videos and music or setting up an obstacle course where children have to crawl under the table, go up the stairs, and jump.

* Go for walks or ride bikes together and watch their balance and how soon they get tired.

Parents know their children best

and often are the first to notice a concern, but when children are not able to be around other children and adults, some delays can slip through the cracks. Therefore, it is very important to have regular checks of your child's skills with their primary care provider. And in between those visits you can keep track of what your child should be learning with the app and website created by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to help families know what to expect. You can find the milestones or the app information at <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html>.

And most importantly, spending time playing and talking with your child helps to grow your bond and create happy, loving memories together.

Emily Brandt, MD, is a developmental/behavioral pediatrician for Anna Shaw Children's Institute.



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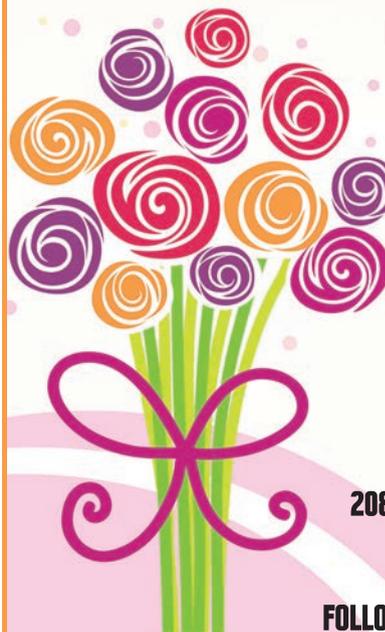
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Detention Center staff works to keep inmates safe

By Jimmy Espy
EDITOR

Conditions in a jail would seem perfect for the spread of the COVID-19 virus, but so far the Murray County Detention Center has avoided that potentially dangerous and expensive calamity.

Sheriff Jimmy Davenport credits the aggressive efforts of jail staffers.

“They get all the credit,” Davenport told *The Times* in a recent interview. “We have great people working in the jail and they have done an outstanding job during the pandemic.”

Davenport said an outbreak of COVID-19 at the jail could have a major impact. That’s why he and his staff have taken steps to keep jail inmates safe.

“We don’t really know what it would be like if we had an outbreak in the general population, what it would cost,” Davenport said. “But we are medically responsible for the inmates and it’s also the right thing to do.”

Cpl. Trena Leonard has been at the forefront of the effort to combat COVID-19. Those efforts include a lot of cleaning, a lot of testing and attention to procedure.



PHOTO BY JIMMY ESPY

Sheriff Jimmy Davenport and Cpl. Trena Leonard.

“We use wipes, bleach, Lysol spray, a defogger,” Leonard said. “We wipe down everything.”

Leonard said inmates weren’t the only concern. The health of staff members also had to be watched closely.

“We check temperatures every shift,” said Leonard. “If someone shows any signs, we send them home. We do whatever we have to do.”

Leonard contracted COVID-19 and spent two weeks in quarantine. Davenport said several staff members in the sheriff’s department, which is adjacent to the jail, came down with the virus, but the inmates remained largely free of the illness.

“We had one test positive,” said Leonard. “He complained of symptoms. Our medical staff called the doctor. The inmate was put in a quarantine cell so he would not be in contact with anyone else.”

The inmate tested positive and was later bonded out.

“Our staff took extra precautions with him in quarantine,” Leonard said. “After he showered, we went in and cleaned the shower and used the fogger gun.”

The department employs two nurses. They work the first and second shifts. The department also has a contract with a doctor, who comes in once a week but is also on call.

Davenport said that at the end of last year, the

SEE **DETENTION**, PAGE 11

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FILE PHOTO

Sherry Walls, of Chatsworth, received a COVID-19 vaccination in January. Administering the shot is Carmen Hagans of the Murray County Health Department.

Training proves crucial to public health response

By Jimmy Espy
EDITOR

The training paid off.

There was no panic at the Murray County Health Department as the COVID-19 pandemic began to dig into Northwest Georgia.

“We have prepared for pandemics in the past,” said Debbie Pearson, county nurse manager at the MCHD. “That’s part of our yearly training. We haven’t been totally surprised by what has happened. Public health is very proactive and we drill every year to prepare for things like this.”

Pearson oversees a staff of 10 full-time nurses. The demands of dealing with COVID-19, on top of the health department’s regular duties, have necessitated the use of part-time employees for data entry and vaccine clinics.

“We closed the health department to everything but essential services for a while, but now it’s back open,” Pearson said.

The health department has been responsible for many of the COVID-19 vaccines which have been administered in Murray County. At first, the shots were done at the health department office on Old Dalton Ellijay Road in Chatsworth. Later, the COVID vaccination clinic was moved to the more spacious Murray County Recreation Department on Hyden Tyler Road.

“Anthony Pittman (recreation director) and his staff couldn’t have been more gracious,” said Pearson. “For us, doing this out here is safer. We have more room for social distanc-

SEE PUBLIC HEALTH, PAGE 11



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First responders serve a crucial role in pandemic

By Jimmy Espy
EDITOR

Dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic hasn't been easy for anybody in a public service job, but firefighters and other first responders have faced some of the toughest challenges.

Murray County operates eight fire stations and employs about 40 full-time firefighters. That group is reinforced by 10-15 active volunteer firefighters. The firefighters interact with the public regularly, sometimes in situations where lives are in peril.

It isn't an easy job in normal times. Now, add a highly contagious pandemic to the equation.

"We've put additional precautions in place and are taking extra care," said Dewayne Bain, who has been fire chief in Murray County since 2005. "But we're still running medical calls and EMS assistance."

Bain said his staff has been hit with COVID-19 infections and at times that has led to "skeleton" staffing. But he said no stations have been closed and service has continued.

"One person being out upsets the schedule and we've had three people get sick on one shift," Bain said. "One of them had to go on a ventilator and was



Murray County Fire Station 1 is one of eight county fire stations.

out for a long time. But he's back now."

Using part-time firefighters helped, Bain said. Because the fire service has eight locations around the county and because firefighters are certified as first responders, the department plays a crucial role in dealing with sick and injured people.

Firefighters are often first on the scene to render aid. They also work closely with Murray EMS. Firefighters also carry life saving equipment like

defibrillators.

One way the pandemic has actually helped the department is an influx of federal spending via the CARES Act of 2020 allowed the department to purchase high tech equipment.

Bain credits the department's new mechanical chest compression device, called the LUCAS device, with saving five lives. He also bought spray devices which blow a mist used to disinfect the fire stations.

Bain said planning on how to deal with pandemic conditions is not new.

"The Department of Public Health several years ago required each county to develop a plan on how it would react in a pandemic," Bain said. "We had to plan for how we would handle it if we were short-handed. We have a plan that includes consolidation of services, including shutting down a fire station, but we haven't had to do that."

Serving the public while at the same time protecting his staff hasn't been easy for Bain.

"We've tried to stay in front of it and I think our people have done an excellent job of staying safe while doing their jobs," Bain said. "They wear the masks and gloves -- that doesn't always prevent infection, but I think it has mostly done its job."

Thank you to all community essential workers who have carried us throughout the past year.

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DETENTION: Vigilance by staff members has paid off so far

FROM PAGE 8

county paid \$26,000 to install a UV lighting system in the heating and air system. The UV lighting kills COVID-19. The system was paid for with money received from the federal government, via the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Security Act (CARES) passed in 2020.

Davenport said another precaution was halting face-to-face visitation. That decision was made early on as the seriousness of the pandemic became clear.

“We did that because we are trying to keep the virus out of the building,” the sheriff said. “We still haven’t opened back up, but we are providing video

visitation,” the sheriff said.

Kiosks placed in each dormitory house communications equipment which allows inmates to talk to family members. The kiosks are open seven days a week.

Leonard said that even though the staff had never had to deal with a major pandemic, the realities of operating a jail already made good sanitation practices a high priority.

“We were already diligent about sanitation ... in a sense, we had already been trained,” she said.

Davenport said the jail staff has tried to follow CDC guidelines as closely as possible. That includes social distancing, wearing masks and frequent hand washing.

The sheriff said he’s also tried to keep the jail population as low as possible.

“We’re still open for business and conducting day-to-day operations, but it helps when we can get people bonded out or shipped to prison quickly,” Davenport said.

Leonard said she appreciates the support the jail staff has received from leadership.

“Everybody in administration makes sure we are taken care of,” she said. “When they tell us ‘You’re doing a good job’ — that’s a nice thing.”

Davenport is effusive in his praise.

“We have absolutely the best people,” he said. “They have kept the detention center running like a well-oiled machine.”

PUBLIC HEALTH: Preparation is key to successful response

FROM PAGE 9

ing, more space to set up.”

The health department is no longer testing for COVID, but vaccinations are being done at the recreation department.

Pearson said the county health department has benefited from strong leadership at the district level. Still, there have been challenges.

“We’re all coping with day-to-day changes,” she said. “We’ve all had to adjust. Sometimes the public gets frustrated with a lack of knowledge. We don’t

know everything.”

Pearson said local efforts in response to COVID have been “very collaborative.” She praised local schools, emergency management, sheriff, police and fire and Commissioner Greg Hogan.

“The effort has been very cohesive,” she said.



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