

# Opening Up America...from Page 1A

returning to more routine operations," Kemp said Thursday. "The Peach State will continue to prioritize our citizenry's health and wellbeing. In the coming days, I will outline how Georgia will move forward."

"Many Georgians are ready to get back to work, and the fundamentals of our economy remain strong. I am confident that we will successfully rebound from this public health emergency."

Kemp has extended the shelter-in-place order through the end of April. When he and governors across the U.S. do decide to reopen their respective states, they will likely be adhering closely to the president's guidelines as enumerated at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>.

According to the president, his "Opening Up America Again" guidelines should be implementable on a statewide or county-by-county basis at each governor's discretion.

Before moving to a new phase, including into Phase One, the guidelines recommend that states and regions within states wait until they are experiencing downward trajectories of influenza-like illnesses and COVID-like cases reported within a 14-day period.

Furthermore, prior to proceeding through the phased comeback, states and regions should wait for a downward trajectory of documented cases or of positive tests as a percent of total tests within a 14-day period.

Also, it's recommended that hospitals be able to treat all patients without crisis care, and that they have robust testing programs in place "for at-risk healthcare workers, including emerging antibody testing," before moving to a new phase.

If all of these "gating criteria" can be met in the leadup to each new phase, then the CDC and president believe it will be safe for states to progress through the three phases of reopening.

Of course, spikes in new cases are highly likely as more and more people venture back out into the population, and the president said recently that, if necessary, areas may need to start over if things get bad enough to shut down again.

Phase One stipulates that vulnerable individuals should continue sheltering in place, while advising everyone else to maintain proper social distancing in public, minimize non-essential travel and avoid groups of more

than 10 people when social distancing can't be followed.

For the purposes of the guidelines, vulnerable individuals are defined as the elderly and people with serious underlying health conditions.

Employers are being encouraged to promote teleworking whenever possible in Phase One and to reopen their business in stages.

Schools that are already closed should remain closed, according to Phase One guidelines, while venues like movie theaters, indoor dining areas, bars and gyms can reopen with strict physical distancing protocols. Visits to senior living facilities and hospitals should remain prohibited.

In Phase Two, vulnerable individuals should continue to shelter in place. For non-vulnerable individuals, social distancing will still be part of the rebounding process, but restrictions on gatherings will be revised upward to avoidance of social settings of more than 50 people.

All non-essential travel can resume in Phase Two, and schools/daycares will be allowed to reopen. Nursing home/hospital visits will still be prohibited, but bars may operate "with diminished standing-room occupancy."

Finally, if states and regions meet the above "gating criteria" after initiating Phase Two, they can move onto Phase Three, which will enable vulnerable individuals to resume public interactions while responsibly practicing social distancing.

Phase Three is when things start to look more normal again, with recommendations for low-risk populations to

consider minimizing time spent in crowded environments, and employers being allowed to resume unrestricted staffing.

Senior care facilities and hospitals can welcome back visitors in Phase Three, granted they practice strict hygiene habits, and large venues may operate under more relaxed physical distancing measures.

Throughout each of the phases, individuals are advised to continue adhering to COVID-19 best practices such as frequent handwashing, maintaining social distance, and wearing facial coverings in public, even when healthy. Of course, people should stay home if sick.

Employers should continue to follow recommended guidelines for workspaces as well throughout each phase, including monitoring employees for sickness and sanitizing shared spaces.

Mass testing, including antibody tests to detect undiagnosed cases of COVID-19, will help clear up many of the uncertainties surrounding the disease, including actual transmission and mortality rates. In the long run, this will give people even more confidence to return to public life.

The demographics have shown that, so far, this disease is affecting older populations at a much higher rate than younger populations.

For example, of the 13,130 deaths reported in the U.S. between Feb. 1 and April 11, there were zero COVID-19 deaths in children under 1 year of age; 2 deaths for children aged 1-4; 1 death for children aged 5-14; and 13 deaths in the 15-24 age range.

Influenza appears to be deadlier for children, with 11, 27, 36 and 37 respective deaths recorded in each of the above age ranges over the same time period.

The overwhelming majority of reported COVID-19 deaths between Feb. 1 and April 11 occurred in older populations: 45-54, 751 deaths; 55-64, 1,773 deaths; 65-74, 2,919 deaths; 75-84, 3,576 deaths; and 85 years and over, 3,693 deaths.

These numbers underscore the importance of vulnerable populations continuing to shelter in place while less vulnerable members of the population do all that they can to limit the spread of the highly contagious disease when out in the public sphere.

After all, if not for the society-altering social distancing measures currently being implemented everywhere at once, the numbers of infected and dead would undoubtedly be much, much worse.

As of Friday, medical trips to emergency departments and outpatient providers in Georgia for coronavirus-like illnesses were elevated compared to normal levels this time of year, but decreased compared to numbers reported the previous week.

"At this time, there is little influenza virus circulation," the CDC said. "The levels of people presenting for care with these symptoms is likely due to COVID-19 but may be tempered by a number of factors including less influenza-like illnesses overall because of widespread adoption of social distancing efforts and changes in healthcare seeking behavior."

## Food Pantry...from Page 1A

"People have been having good hearts, and they have dug in their pockets and helped us out greatly."

The pantry receives new people and regulars alike who visit the pantry in search of food assistance. To manage the safety of customers, the pantry only allows one person to pick up food at a time as a way to maintain social distancing.

"People are coming in at a steady rate," Sullivan said. "I know that Mountain Presbyterian closed their food pantry down — they are no longer doing anything — but I think that Antioch is still doing theirs, and First Baptist is still doing theirs."

"People are coming in, and I have not had any problems out of anybody. Everybody is grateful for what I have. We make sure that people come in as one person from one family at a time, and we clean things up that they touch, and stuff like that. It is going really well, and people have not been in a panic."

Everyone is worrying about toilet paper, Sullivan said, and while she is giving some away to those who need it, she doesn't have a lot on hand, so she's limited in what she can do there.

"I have had a lot of new people coming in here because they are out of work and they are in need," Sullivan said. "Most of my regular people know what I have, and people are just grateful that I am here."

Fortunately, supplies at the pantry have not been affected



In a show of community support, WoodmenLife donated \$5000 to the Food Pantry recently, which will go a long way toward helping people in the county. Photo/Submitted

by shortages caused by the pandemic, as the facility was stocked beforehand, including prior to the shelter-in-place order.

And though the pantry is currently stocked, there is still some concern about how long the present conditions will last and what that will do to stores in the area.

"I had just spent around \$5,000 on food two weeks before this all happened," Sullivan said. "I order a bunch of food like four or five times a year. Then we put it on the trailer, and my husband and I bring it over here."

"I had just done that, so it worked out really well, but if this keeps going — and I am hoping it does not — I'm not sure what is going to happen."

Representatives from the Union County Farmers Market showed their support for the community last week by preparing food at the Union County Canning Plant, then delivering it to the Food Pantry.

"We just wanted to do something at the Farmers Market to help the situation," Market Manager Mickey Cummings said.

A donor supplied the 88 quarts' worth of pinto beans that ended up being canned, and the donation was made in the name of the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Right of Way Department, Cummings said.

For more information about getting food from the pantry, call 706-745-6596.

## Firefighter Pruitt...from Page 1A

to be a little bit thin because volunteers were out working and doing other things.

"So, we hired Ernie full time to run calls over there during the day. And not only that, he can check out the stations and do any other kind of activities that we need done in Suches as far as the Fire Department and the Emergency Management Agency."

According to Dyer, having a full-time firefighter working weekdays in Suches is important for two main reasons.

"No 1, you have somebody committed full time all the time to go on those calls," Dyer said. "No. 2, Suches is a long distance away for EMS calls, so you're talking 20-25 minutes before an ambulance can get over there."

"Having somebody on the scene quickly and being able to perform any kind of life-saving medical procedures is very important over there. And again, we've always had a great response in Suches, it's just that we now have a dedicated person that is ready to go."

Pruitt began his new role on March 22, and outside of his full-time hours — every Monday through Friday between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. — he'll continue to serve the community as always on an on-call basis.

As part of his first responder volunteerism, the Suches native earned his EMT certification in the early '90s, though his primary occupation was that of electrician. When the Great Recession brought construction to a halt, he decided in 2009 to work full time for Union General EMS, all the while continuing to volunteer.

Pruitt went back to school in 2012 for additional medical training. He became a registered

nurse in 2015, after which he went to work in Union General's emergency room, and later, at the hospital's Suches clinic.

Now, he works solely for the Fire Department, and he's excited about the opportunity and what it means for his hometown, given that the closest first responder to the isolated Suches area is usually a firefighter.

"I think it's a tremendous asset, something that's been a long time coming," Pruitt said. "We've not been able to get volunteers as much. With the amount of training that's required to become certified, it just takes a lot for a person who is working full time and trying to volunteer at night."

Added Pruitt, "So, this will be tremendous for Suches knowing that there's somebody that can respond at least eight hours every day, and then, the volunteers would still respond during the day as well if they're available, but at night, there are more of those at home."

And Firefighter Pruitt wants everyone in Suches to know that the service they've come to trust will continue to operate at the same high level on the volunteer side, just with the added benefit of a full-time, dedicated firefighter with medical training ready to respond at a moment's notice.

"This should enhance our ability to protect people and their property," Pruitt said, adding that he's thankful for the resources that allow Station 5 to safeguard the community. "Our leadership has been very receptive to Suches and understood our needs, including (Sole Commissioner) Lamar Paris, who's been extremely good to Suches and the Fire

Department."

Volunteer Doug Pruitt will transition from second lieutenant at Station 5 to first lieutenant over the roughly 20 Suches volunteers, while Volunteer Training Officer Derrick Pruitt will serve double duty by assuming the role of second lieutenant as well.

Both Pruitt men are sons of Ernie and professional first responders outside the county, and several of the other volunteer firefighters in the Valley Above the Clouds work as full-time responders also. Taken together with Pruitt's new role, Suches is in good hands with Station 5.

"I've been here 30 years, and I've known Ernie ever since I started," UCFD Battalion Chief Richard Jones said. "He's always been a big help. We depended on him while he was a volunteer, so this is going to help us that much more on that side."

"We have searches and other things in Suches, too, and it takes us a while to get coordinated and over there, whereas they can go ahead and have a hasty team going in before we get there."

The most common calls for service in Suches involve medical responses and automobile accidents, including motorcycle wrecks, and volunteers are always encouraged to help their isolated community deal with these issues.

"Having a career person over there is a great asset, but we still need volunteers, and especially in that area to help Ernie out," Chief Dyer said. "So, anybody who wants to volunteer, we'll be glad to process them, get them trained, and put them in any kind of role that we can find for them to respond — medical, search and rescue, or fire, but we're really looking for firefighters."