Robbery Arrest...from Page 1A

committed.

"We want to thank the public for their help in getting (news of the robbery) out there so folks could see it," Baxter said. "Those tips led to evidence, which ultimately led to the arrest of Mr. Foley."

The robbery occurred around 11:15 p.m. on Saturday, April 25, when a masked white male – later identified as Foley – entered the Circle K and waited for a customer to leave before approaching the counter, revealing a handgun

and demanding money from the clerk on duty, Baxter said.

Fortunately, no one was hurt, but the robber did make off with an undisclosed amount of cash.

A Blairsville Police officer arrived at the store within 30 seconds of being contacted by E-911 dispatchers, but the robber had already left the premises.

The Union County Sheriff's Office responded to the scene as well and acted as backup that evening.

It's been several years since Blairsville's last armed robbery, Baxter said, and this one was initially complicated by the fact that the suspect hid his identity and avoided suspicion by wearing a mask and gloves during a time when doing so in public is perfectly normal.

"With everything going on right now, it's tough," Baxter said. "As the public will be able to tell, some of the criminals are going to take advantage of the mask and glove thing."

Kevin Michael Foley has been arrested and charged in the April 25 armed robbery of the Circle K on Blue Ridge Street and Murphy Highway.   Photo/Security Cam

Nursing Homes...from Page 1A

had closed its nursing homes to visitors and the public and instituted a number of other preventive measures.

Employees began receiving regular health screenings before being allowed to work, and the Health System educated staff members extensively about the virus, including what symptoms to look for, both in themselves and in residents.

"This whole thing has evolved – we find out more and more all the time," Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett said. "It's evolved as far as what these symptoms can look like.

"The elderly population is not always a typical presentation, so, it can trick you sometimes. You have to watch for atypical presentations to be able to evaluate those patients in a timely manner for something you might not think of as a COVID sign or symptom.

"For example, a resident might not necessarily run a fever; they might just have a decreased level of consciousness or be more fatigued than normal, have diarrhea – just atypical symptoms, not what (health care officials) initially presented to us as far as fever and respiratory symptoms."

As of press time, the Department of Community Health was reporting that one resident and two staff members had tested positive at Union County Nursing Home, which houses 137 residents. Chatuge Regional, with its population of 100 nursing home residents, had one positive resident and one positive employee, also according to DCH. Fortunately, all are doing well at this time.

So, what procedures does the Health System follow in the event of a potential COVID-19 case inside one of its nursing homes?

For starters, a physician will evaluate a symptomatic resident to make a determination as to whether they think the resident needs to be tested, Barnett said.

And while mass testing is not being advised at this time by state and federal health care officials, it may become warranted if a sufficient number of nursing home residents and/or employees develop COVID-19 inside either facility.

The physician-approved

testing method has been employed multiple times for symptomatic residents inside the nursing home, only to turn up negative tests so far, but there are other procedures the Health System has adopted to catch infections.

In the Chatuge Regional Nursing Home, for instance, the single positive resident was a new transfer into the nursing home who received a test as a matter of course before being introduced to the general population.

This resident was not experiencing symptoms but was tested anyway out of an abundance of caution. It turned out that the resident was an asymptomatic carrier of the disease, and they were segregated from everyone else until clear of their infection.

State and federal guidelines have changed since that new resident tested positive, so that, if another resident should develop COVID-19 at the facility, he or she would be transferred out of the nursing home to Union General for treatment and recovery away from other residents.

Furthermore, upon recovery, that resident would have to test negative for active infection twice before returning to the nursing home, per guidelines established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Georgia Department of Public Health.

As far as employees, all wear personal protective equipment such a masks and gloves when interacting with residents, and the Health System is having residents wear masks as well during one-on-one staff interactions to provide a double barrier against potential transmission.

Symptomatic staff are tested and must self-quarantine until a negative result comes back. In the event of a positive, an employee must quarantine at home for at least seven days before taking another test, and he or she must test negative before returning to work.

In a worst-case outbreak scenario, the Health System has a "surge plan" in place, to include designated areas for extra patients at both hospitals.

Currently, Union General in Blairsville is where area virus patients are receiving treatment, including patients from Union and Towns, and there's still plenty of space to house patients should the disease become more widespread in the community.

On average, the hospital is treating from one to six patients with active COVID-19 infections at any given time, plus another four to six patients suspected of having the disease while awaiting test results, with some of these patients being hospitalized for upwards of two weeks.

So far, Union County has only had 10 patients hospitalized for COVID-19, with seven for Towns.

The Department of Public Health's hospitalization numbers per county may seem low; however, Union General treats patients from around the region, so individual county data would not be reflective of the actual number of locally hospitalized patients.

Chatuge Regional Hospital in Hiawassee has been designated a "clean facility," though it has extra capacity to treat COVID-19 patients if that becomes necessary.

"Right now, Chatuge Regional's geri/psych area is temporarily closed, so we could use that entire unit for COVID patients if we needed to," Barnett said. "They also have a three-bed ICU we're not using that could be converted

to a negative pressure area to house COVID patients."

Barnett said she would like to thank the local Emergency Management Agencies, school systems and other county officials "for working with us on surge planning outside the hospital if needed."

"We have detailed plans for an off-site mini hospital if it were needed," Barnett said. "We have an awesome community that comes together and is there to help and support each other."

And that support is definitely needed right now, as times are tough, especially for nursing home residents who likely don't get enough visitors even during normal times.

The usual group and social activities like games and singing have been replaced with individual activities inside residents' rooms, and family visitations are conducted via FaceTime.

But as cumbersome as the lockdowns, close symptom monitoring, employee footwear bleaching upon entry into the facilities, constant wearing of personal protective equipment, decreased interaction between residents, etc., may seem, these measures are designed with one main goal in mind: to keep residents safe.

"We're constantly trying to think of anything that we can do as an extra precaution to protect those residents," Barnett said. "Our staff has been wonderful; they have been awesome with all these things that we've put into place that makes their job much harder.

"And it's certainly hard on the residents, because we've got them confined to their rooms, and they haven't been able to dine together or do their group activities for weeks, on top of not being able to see their families."

Barnett said the hospitals and nursing homes are thankful for all of the community support, including the delivery of masks, gloves, food and prayers.

"We are very, very grateful," Barnett said. "One of the challenges in these difficult times, with these different types of labor-intensive patients and all the PPE, being nervous and afraid of the virus itself – it's all a hit on staff morale.

"And it's a huge morale booster for our community to have stepped up like they have and show our staff love and attention by providing them with meals and snacks and homemade masks, praying for us. All those things are huge, and we're grateful."

Union General Health requested the Georgia National Guard to clean its hospitals and nursing homes in recent weeks, and Barnett said they were incredibly proud to welcome the troops to the community.

Between the Union General and Chatuge Regional hospitals, through Friday, the Health System had tested 457 individuals, resulting in 64 positive tests. Not all of these individuals are residents of Union and Towns counties.

These figures are not representative of the total number of tests being conducted locally, as the Health Department, area physicians and the Georgia National Guard are testing also.

The Health System's facilities will remain on lockdown until further notice, and the hospitals are examining next steps to restart elective procedures – colonoscopies, mammograms, hip replacements and more – after Gov. Kemp reauthorized their performance in recent weeks.