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no reported cases among employees at press time.

In neighboring Union County, both an employee and a resident of Union County Nursing Home had tested positive for the disease by press time.

The employee was reported by the Department of Community Health last week, and the Union County Nursing Home started calling family members Sunday to alert them to the positive test in the resident, though it was unknown prior to publication if the cases were connected.

Health System representatives declined to comment on whether or not residents and employees were being mass tested in any of its facilities.

"We follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Public Health and Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services guidelines for any required

reporting," the Health System said. "Anyone who is identified during this pandemic as a potential exposure within our system is notified and Georgia DPH guidelines are followed.

"Any community contacts are researched and contacted via the Georgia DPH epidemiologists. We are working hard to navigate these difficult times to keep our employees and patients safe, while also respecting their privacy with their personal health."

Residents of long-term care facilities are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, with upwards of 20 percent of novel coronavirus deaths in the U.S. to date having occurred in nursing homes, according to a survey of state data compiled by ABC News.

"Given their congregated nature and resident population served (e.g., older adults often with underlying chronic medical conditions), nursing

home populations are at the highest risk of being affected by COVID-19," the CDC said. "If infected with SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, residents are at increased risk of serious illness."

On April 9, Chatuge Regional Hospital received results of a test showing one of its employees being positive for COVID-19. Prior to testing, the employee last worked at Chatuge on April 2 and had no symptoms while on shift.

The employee was instructed to isolate and socially distance per CDC guidelines, and notification was made to the Towns County Public Health Department at the time of the test, with a positive result coming on April 9.

Georgia National Guard troops visited both Chatuge Regional Hospital and Chatuge Regional Nursing Home recently for prescheduled cleanings, as well as the hospital and nursing home in Union County.

Virus Testing...from Page 1A

"It's more of a drive-up site than it is a drive-thru," he said. "(Patients) will drive into the parking lot and (health care workers) will come out to the car and collect the specimen. There will be signs directing people where to go."

However, testing is unavailable to the general public, so people will need to get a referral from their local health department, health care professional or physician before a test will be administered.

"If it's determined a test is needed, the patient will be given a certain time to visit the Health Department and a person under investigation number," Palmer said. "When they get to the Health Department, the staff will ask for their number and collect the specimen."

Appointments for testing will be available Tuesdays and Fridays only from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. Patients will be notified of their results via telephone within 24-48 hours, which is a significant improvement over previous wait times, Palmer said.

"When we first started testing, we had some long turnaround times," he said. "Some tests were taking several days to come back, sometimes up to a week, and in rare cases, over a week."

The procedure conducted at the site will provide the patient with a single positive

or negative result for COVID-19. If the test issues a positive reading, the patient will be instructed to self-isolate.

"When we ask you to self-isolate in the home, that means to isolate away from family members," Palmer said. "Try to find one room with its own bathroom, and if they need to enter other parts of the house, try to maintain 6 feet of distance."

No antibody test is presently available to let people know if they've been previously infected by the virus, but Palmer noted that blood banks around the state are requesting donations from COVID-19 survivors for use in coronavirus treatments.

While Palmer doesn't believe the Towns County site will get swamped, he is currently in a wait-and-see mode and will have a greater understanding once the scheduling of appointments is underway.

And whenever they have a better grasp of the area's demand for testing, adjustments to the site schedule and changes to the number of employees could be around the corner.

In the meantime, Palmer urges the public to follow social distancing guidelines and continue to wash their hands regularly. He also suggested using a designated family member to run errands instead

of going out as a group.

"That limits the number of people that could get exposed," he said. "Right now, we're still in that mitigation phase where we're trying to stop the spread, so anything we can do not to expose ourselves makes us better off."

In closing, Palmer acknowledged that his mother resides in an assisted living facility that's currently under lockdown, so he understands the struggles of being separated from family members during the pandemic.

"I know it's hard when you have loved ones that you can't see, who you're used to visiting frequently," he said. "You can try to FaceTime or call them on the phone more often, just things like that really help."

"You can also use mail or email to send them pictures so they don't feel so isolated away from everyone."

For more information or for a referral, call the Union County Health Department at 706-745-6292 or the Towns County Health Department at 706-896-2265.

"Effective immediately, all symptomatic individuals will be eligible for COVID-19 testing," Public Health said recently. "Health care workers, first responders, law enforcement and long-term care facility residents and staff will still be prioritized for testing regardless of whether they are or are not symptomatic."