

'This is our first rodeo'



SAVANNAH BLAKE | THE JOURNAL

Oconee County tax assessor's office employees Kevin Robinson and Dawn Smith wipe down surfaces at the Oconee County government complex in Walhalla. County employees are taking the recommended cleaning and hygiene policies seriously, according to county administrator Amanda Brock. "I'm very proud of our staff for the fact they've taken the responsibility to keep their offices and common areas clean," she said.

Oconee authorities preparing for COVID-19 outbreak

BY CAITLIN HERRINGTON
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Though it was a virus of a different sort, the malware that hit the county government last summer helped prepare it for dealing with COVID-19 as it inches closer to Oconee County.

Plans for operating with minimal staff were solidified, and county officials have met with department heads to discuss what changes might need to be made to maintain operations if COVID-19 hits the area.

"We're ramping up anything that we can make sure we can still serve the public," Oconee County interim fire chief Scott Krein said. "At the same time, we're encouraging social distancing,

making sure we take care of decontamination so that the departments that have the most opportunity to bring contamination in — as it inevitably will come to Oconee in some form — are able to limit that."

Emergency service operations will continue, according to Krein, Oconee County administrator Amanda Brock and Sher-

iff Mike Crenshaw. Additional precautions are lined up, and employees are reminded to follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's guidelines for hygiene, but most operations were normal at press time Friday.

"We're currently continuing as we would in any cold or

» INSIDE

- Clemson suspends school events statewide. **A2**
- Southern Wesleyan to move campus classes online. **A2**
- Special Olympics Spring Games canceled. **A2**
- Pair of local political events postponed. **A5**
- President declares national emergency; Pelosi announces aid deal. **D1**

Hospitals plan for coronavirus symptom influx

THE JOURNAL STAFF

SENECA — Prisma Health is making its virtual visits free for those with coronavirus-like symptoms and AnMed Health has taken extra steps for in-person screenings to prepare for an increase of people worried they have COVID-19.

"Testing to rule out COVID-19 must be done under negative pressure and requires a special room," AnMed Health

SEE HOSPITALS, PAGE A5



OUR VIEW
TO READ A RELATED
EDITORIAL, TURN
TO PAGE A4.

SEE OUTBREAK, PAGE A6

OUTBREAK: 'We have to remain fluid and open-minded'

FROM PAGE A1

u season," Brock said. Staff has reminders or people to wash their hands, which should be first response to anything. We are taking the recommendations and precautionary steps as recommended by the CDC and SCD-HEC. I don't think a panicked pre-response is proper for us."

It's a fluid situation capable of changing quickly, local authorities agreed, but that's why the plans are in place and protocol exists.

"All of our staff have masks and gloves in their vehicles to deal with bodily fluids and the other things law enforcement deals with on a daily basis," Crenshaw said, noting one vendor was out of face-masks and gloves when the department ordered additional inventory recently. "We're just trying to be prepared in case we do get into something long term."

Step one of the county's pandemic plan has been solidified, Brock said, though it's not being implemented at this point.

"We're preparing for implementation of the plan should circumstances necessitate operating our systems off-site," Brock said. "That includes working from home and exploring ways to broadcast our council meetings so citizens don't have to attend in person in order to stay informed of government happenings."

it is a combination of recommendations from local, state and federal authorities working in conjunction to determine what's best for each county.

"We will be notified of any confirmed cases in Oconee County as part of safety protocol," Brock said. "We should have to have a roundtable — part of our standard operating procedure — with the hospital and schools. We would do that under standard emergency protocol with the direction of Scott Krein."

Individual departments have met with Krein and Brock to discuss preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation. More meetings are planned so each department understands its responsibilities for operations during a pandemic.

"We do not have set numbers to enact the plan. It is designed so that we make the decisions each time, because every pandemic is different," Krein said. "Everything we're talking about now is corona-specific, but the plan itself is standard for any pandemic."

Brock said she is exploring options for sick leave so Oconee County staff members don't feel obligated to come to work when they don't feel well, despite lack of designated days.

The pandemic plan addresses critical services — many of which are



SAVANNAH BLAKE | THE JOURNAL

Assessor Dawn Smith wipes down a window and counter area Friday afternoon at the Oconee County administration offices in Walhalla.

available online — as well as communication and partnerships with neighboring counties.

"There's a concept of operations we determined if we need alternate means of communication with employees or public," Brock said. "Should we go into some kind of quarantine, there is policy in place."

Brock doesn't anticipate "having to shut down the government" but is prepared, per the pandemic plan, to operate with a staff diminished by approximately 40 percent.

'OPEN-MINDED' RESPONSE

There is a sense of heightened awareness throughout all departments, Brock said, and employees are taking the recommended precautions seriously.

"I'm very proud of our staff for the fact they've

"We're going through a series of questions with them," Crenshaw said. "We're screening folks when they come in and can do a little isolation in the detention center, if necessary."

Krein said small adjustments — the number of employees riding in the close quarters of a truck, for instance — can be quickly made without hurting response times during emergencies. As much as possible, he said, the department encourages social distancing and using methods other than face-to-face communication to do business whenever possible.

"This is not the first pandemic. This is our first rodeo," Brock said. "There was a serious flu pandemic years ago when the C strain of the flu came out."

"We have to remain fluid and open-minded about our response," she added. "Until we see a problem that requires a different response, we'll conduct as we always have. Our biggest priority is to be prepared."

cherrington@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-66

GETTING THE GREEN LIGHT

There are no set criteria for enacting Oconee's pandemic plan, Krein said. Rather,