

# Healthy Living

ISSUE 2 • AUGUST 27, 2025

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# A letter from the Managing Editor

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the 2025 Second Edition of Healthy Living. This version spans across the region — and across our four outlets — to highlight local health issues.

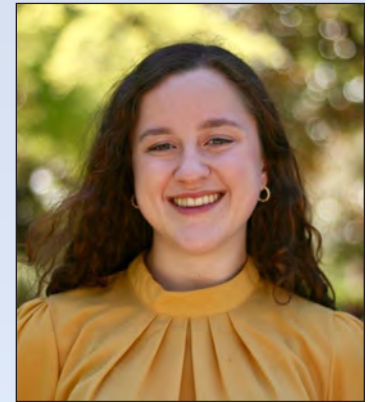
Inside, you'll find tips on navigating your health insurance and doctors' appointments, spotting cancer and how to monitor your care before it reaches crisis.

You'll also find deep dives on football programs that keep kids safe, local health department programs and new companies using artificial intelligence in the health care sector.

And a few things in between, of course.

As the health reporter for Six Rivers Media, my goal is to take a comprehensive look at the issue. Because at the end of the day, everything comes back to your health — if you don't have that, you have nothing at all. From the tap water you drink, to the doctors that take care of you, to the stressors of daily life, it all takes its toll.

We remain committed to not only reporting on health in our region, but providing you with direct resources for your own personal well-being.



That work includes prioritizing an open dialogue with our readers. If you have feedback, questions or tips, you can always reach my inbox at [jmazur@sixriversmedia.com](mailto:jmazur@sixriversmedia.com).

Our entire team has done a great job of providing comprehensive reporting across Northeast Tennessee. And Gabrielle Jones, Johnson City Press' summer intern, has been a steadfast support in putting this edition together. I'm so excited for you to read it.

We'll see you soon for another edition of Healthy Living in February 2026. Until then — stay healthy!

Sincerely,  
Joy Mazur  
Healthy Living Managing Editor | Health Reporter

# Healthy Living

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# Expert advice on how to navigate care and advocate for your health

By **JOY MAZUR**

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**K**nowing how to navigate the health care space efficiently is crucial for both a person's well-being and finances. Victoria Blanken, executive director of Highlands Physicians, Inc. and Bridges Physicians, A Charitable Foundation, said people should advocate for themselves and focus on being good consumers in the health care space.

"In health care, silence will cost you," she said. "You're not being difficult. You're being smart."

As a physician-owned association, Highlands Physicians helps providers improve patient care. Bridges Physicians, A Charitable Foundation helps individuals navigate the complex, technical world of medical bills. Blanken shares tips here for your next appointment — and your next haggle with the insurance agent.

## COORDINATING INSURANCE AND PHYSICIANS

When making appointments, you should know what organizations your insurance will work with. Determining that can get complicated, but Blanken said local patient advocate groups (which can be found with a quick Google search) can help. Many also don't realize that they can call around and



CONTRIBUTED

## Victoria Blanken

"interview" physicians to find the best fit, Blanken noted.

"I always advocate for independent physicians," she added. "They're able to have the autonomy to make decisions for the patient that are in the best interest of the patient." You can also "cost shop" for services like MRIs, Blanken said. Many facilities will post cash-pay prices for diagnostic imaging services. Beforehand, you can call ahead and ask how much the price will be for specific insurance plans, and opt for whichever is more affordable.

## ON THE PHONE WITH INSURANCE

If you're trying to solve an insurance issue over the phone, Blanken recommends asking for a customer representative based in the U.S. That way, you can work with somebody who has personal experience with the nation's system.

"A lot of health plans are offshoring their customer service," she said. "That even

makes a difficult situation more complex."

Before calling, make sure you have your medical records handy. Most importantly, you should ask for an itemized list of medical costs and check that it's accurate. These statements outline exactly what medical services have been billed. You should also have your diagnoses and CPT codes, which are used by health care providers to describe medical services. Then, state the problem very clearly. Blanken recommends using phrases like:

- I've been on X medicine that works for me and controls my symptoms for X years. Why are you not paying for it?
- What do I need to do so that we can get on the same page, so that you can have what you need to approve my medication?
- I'm going to advocate for myself.

"You always want to start out with a voice of what can I do to help you help me," she added.

Reaching out to your local legislators doesn't hurt, either. Blanken said that getting representatives involved with insurance issues can get problems solved quickly.

## ADVOCATING IN AN APPOINTMENT

When in an appointment, Blanken advises bringing a second person for support and having a notebook and medical information on hand. This includes printed-out lists of any other doctors you're seeing, which is especially important for those with chronic and complex conditions.

She said it's best to physically hand the list to physicians, nurses and receptionists and tell them, "We need to coordinate care between Dr. X, Dr. Y and Dr. Z. Here's their phone numbers."

And while it's important to know your medical needs and wants, patients should also understand why doctors may not order tests. Blanken said it's because physicians may not order some tests because they want to keep patients out of a situation where insurance denies the visit.

"They're trying to keep the patient out of a bad position of having to pay for something out-of-pocket that's going to be outrageously expensive," she said. The system is not set up to help patients, Blanken added. Ultimately, though, you should still have a doctor that hears you out.

"If your physician is not listening to your concerns, that's not the physician for you," she said.

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# ETSU Health adds new gynecology surgery expertise

By **GABRIELLE JONES**  
gjones@sixriversmedia.com

**E**ast Tennessee now has access to cutting-edge minimally invasive gynecological surgery through a fellowship-trained specialist who has joined ETSU Health's OB-GYN clinic.

Dr. Salvatore Paolillo specializes in advanced surgical techniques that can help patients who previously had limited treatment options, including those with very large uteri due to fibroids or complicated surgical histories with extensive scar tissue. "It's able to help a broader amount of people, but particularly the kind that would have complications and basically minimize all of them," Paolillo explained.

"I usually tell my patients they are about the size of my pinkie nail," Paolillo said, describing incisions made for the surgery that measure just 5 to 8 millimeters.

This precision translates to dramatic improvements in patient recovery. The

approach greatly reduces hospital stay times, with most patients going home the same day. "Over the past five years that I've been doing this in private practice and out of training, I've only had one or two patients stay overnight," Paolillo noted. He uses the "da Vinci" robot, a sophisticated system that allows surgeons to perform complex procedures through small incisions with enhanced precision, flexibility and control. The robotic system provides 3D high-definition vision and instruments that can rotate and bend beyond the capabilities of the human hand. The technology enables Paolillo to perform intricate gynecological surgeries that would traditionally require large incisions and extended recovery periods. Patients benefit from reduced pain, minimal scarring, shorter hospital stays and faster return to normal activities.

Paolillo's fellowship training represents the highest level of specialty education in minimally invasive gynecological surgery, which



CONTRIBUTED FROM ETSU HEALTH

## Dr. Salvatore Paolillo

ensures patients receive expert-level care for complex conditions. This includes endometriosis, chronic pelvic pain, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), cysts, fibroids, uterine polyps and fertility-reducing conditions.

Paolillo emphasized the importance of bringing advanced surgical options to underserved areas. "The people in this region, I really feel, deserve to have this treatment available to them," he said.

Beyond his technical expertise, Paolillo appreciates the personal connection with his patients. "I enjoy getting to know my patients and being their

partner in figuring out the most appropriate level of care to meet their needs," he said.

Paolillo is board certified in obstetrics and gynecology and earned his M.D. from St. George's University School of Medicine in Grenada. He completed his obstetrics and gynecology residency at New York Presbyterian Brooklyn Methodist Hospital before pursuing his fellowship in minimally invasive gynecological surgery at Good Samaritan Hospital Medical Center in West Islip, New York. He now serves as an assistant professor at ETSU Health's Quillen College of Medicine.

# Jonesborough Farmers Market sees ongoing growth

By THOMAS GAETANO

**J**ONESBOROUGH— Amid adverse weather conditions and indefinite pauses to federal funding for programs like Farm Fresh Fit, the Jonesborough Farmers Market economy is stable and growing.

Deborah Byrd, executive director of the nonprofit Jonesborough Locally Grown (JLG), said the organization measures the success of the local food grower's economy by counting the guests of the weekly markets and interviewing customers and vendors. Based on these metrics, she said the weekly markets are successful.

Byrd said the central question of required reports submitted by vendors to JLG is: "Were they able to monetize the growth of their crop?" These reports help the organization provide information to grantors that partially fund the local market.

One such grant is called the Specialty Crop Block Grant. Byrd said it started with a focus on root vegetables in 2022 and since has grown to include brassicas, leafy greens and kitchen herbs.

Byrd confirmed that federal grants to JLG have paused and may resume, but the organization has no guarantees for continued federal funding. She added that local and state-level grants from the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Appalachian Resource

Conservation Development, as well as private donations, are supporting the program this year.

According to Byrd, the Farm Fresh Fit walking program — where attendees can walk a mile or complete other fitness activities to receive tokens to spend on produce — sees 150-200 participants per week.

One vendor, Debbie Starnes of Carson Creek Farms, confirmed the growth of participation. She noted a wait list for new sellers hoping to reserve space for their food or craft. "We're absolutely growing," Starnes said. "I sell out, thank the Lord, every time."

She said Carson Creek Farms is now in its fifth year as a farmer's market vendor selling home-baked pastries that are prepared the day before the market. Starnes added this guarantees fresh quality by eliminating the need for added preservatives, but does limit the amount she can produce.

Along with her husband, retired teacher and local coach Sherman Starnes, she operates a vegetable garden for personal use and raises cattle. She said their farm is on "good ground."

"We share our food, but we don't use it as income," she said.

Small scale food production at the local level has some trade-offs compared to food that is mass produced, according to Byrd. She said the biggest is the



THOMAS GAETANO

**Produce items found at the Boone Street Market are sourced from growers that are no farther than 100 miles from the store. Store Manager David Phillips added that the "grab and go" meals made from local products are increasingly popular among the lunch hour crowds of Jonesborough.**

upfront investment of time and resources by the individual growers, which is necessary when the automation, preservatives and lower labor costs of mass production are not available.

Zane Abplanalp and Amy Winck are in their first year as a vendor for the farmer's market and together operate a half-acre urban farm in Johnson City. Their businesses, Leftfield Urban Farm and Slowbird Bread Company, are based on Abplanalp's background in culinary arts, with a focus on bread and pastries.

"A lot of grain grows here," he said, "but it's for animal feed." Abplanalp said his farm grows corn for grits and cornmeal and uses locally-sourced wheat and rye to mill into a usable product for baked goods.

The couple cited challenges brought on by excessive rains this July for their tomato and melons. "It hasn't had a chance to dry out," he said, causing blight, low leaf production and sun scalding.

David Phillips, store manager of Boone Street Market, added that foot traffic, while far from the large grocery outlets, is steady with new community members taking great interest in shopping locally.

"Our mission is to bring local food to the community," he said, noting that the goal is not to compete with larger grocery stores, but rather to support local growers. Phillips said that 80% of the market's revenue goes back to local farmers.

Phillips also said the business is doing well and that he is proud  
See **FARMERS**, Page M7



THOMAS GAETANO

Amy Wincek (left) works with Zane Abplanalp (right) to produce the breads and pastries for their business. She said this region was once called the “bread basket of the Southeast” because of the conducive growing environment for grains.

## FARMERS:

From Page M7

of the products sold at the store. These include produce items that are now in peak season, like tomatoes and watermelons. It also includes sodas from Asheville and western North Carolina; milk from Virginia; ice creams made at the Mountain Harvest Kitchen in Unicoi; Overmountain Coffee; eggs, bread and honey; and meat products like pork, chicken, beef, bison, lamb and trout.

All of the products’ place of origin are clearly labeled on the packaging and all vendors must pass a site inspection by the Boone

Street Market, Phillips said. Nearly all items are sourced no farther than 100 miles from Jonesborough, he added.

Community food producers, and the organizations that facilitate the weekly markets, are succeeding despite the loss of federal funds and unfavorable July weather. More information about local Jonesborough vendors can be found at [www.jonesboroughlocallygrown.org](http://www.jonesboroughlocallygrown.org).

# Start with conversation, not crisis

By KRISTEN EARLY

Contributed from ETSU Health

For some, visiting the doctor may be something you just don’t want to do. Maybe you want to avoid the potential expense. Or maybe you’re overwhelmed at the idea that you might hear bad news.

Often, we’re busy and just don’t find the time to take care of ourselves.

However, there are significant benefits to building a relationship with a primary care provider. Studies have shown that routine visits to a family medicine or internal medicine physician improve your chances for catching health problems before they turn into something serious.

And when serious health problems do arise, they are often better maintained, meaning you enjoy a better outcome, according to Dr. Jason Moore, an ETSU Health Family Medicine provider and chair of Quillen College of Medicine’s Family Medicine Department.

Those visits also give you the opportunity to get to know your doctor, building trust and opening the door to important conversations about your health.

Unfortunately, the cost to avoiding those conversations with a primary care physician can sometimes mean we’re left seeking health care in the middle of a crisis.

“Health issues as simple as a urinary tract infection or pneumonia can cause complex and sometimes dangerous symptoms when they’re not caught early,” said Dr. Moore. “Patients end up paying high costs,

both physically and financially, at the emergency department for health needs that could be more safely addressed earlier, within a primary care clinic.”

As a National Committee for Quality Assurance recognized program, ETSU Health’s seven primary care clinics are known as Patient-Centered Medical Homes. This means that the clinics care for the whole person, offering team-based care and focusing on issues that patients commonly face.

“It’s important to us that we educate patients on health topics that are common diseases where early action could mean a dramatic improvement in a patient’s outcome,” Dr. Moore said. “For example, with a UTI, patients need to know that symptoms could include pain in the lower abdomen, or even confusion or changes in behavior for older adults.”

The clinics educate patients about heart health, including early detection and monitoring of high blood pressure, which can decrease the risk of congestive heart failure, a common condition within our region. They also talk about early signs of pneumonia so that patients have a chance to act before they end up hospitalized.

“These are just a few examples of conversations that, when you have them early with someone you trust, are less scary and can instead be empowering,” Dr. Moore said.

For more information about ETSU Health’s primary care clinics, visit [ETSUHealth.org](http://ETSUHealth.org).



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# Pickleball more popular than ever in Johnson City

By **JEFF BIRCHFIELD**

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**P**ickleball remains in very high demand and shows no signs of slowing up according to Johnson City Recreation Services Manager Rachel Evans.

Memorial Park Community Center has 12 outdoor courts and six indoor courts. Eight more courts were recently opened at Metro Kiwanis Park to go along with five tennis courts.

Even though Kingsport has its own strong program and



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**Olivia Holmes stretches to return the ball in a friendly game of pickleball with family members at Memorial Park Community Center.**

Bristol has its professional tournament in early August, she said Johnson City remains a popular place to play.

“They come from Johnson City and all counties around us to play both indoor and outdoor,” Evans said. “Bristol, Erwin, even some from Kingsport comes up.”

It’s popular at different times for different groups of people. On a recent Saturday, there were couples playing together, as well as a family which had the mother, father, daughter and son-in-law in a friendly game on the court.

“We have more seniors in the morning,” she said. “In the afternoon, we have more of the college-age individuals and then more of the working crowd and families. It’s really all ages. The oldest person I’ve been in contact with is in his early 90s.”

Courts are often full from the time they open until 11 a.m. or noon. There will be a slow gap in the heat of the afternoon and then they’re nearly full the remainder of the evening. Evans said it’s hard to call any time or day at peak time because they stay busy most of the time.

They’ve had people play in the rain and even the snow,

although the hottest part of the summer days is the time less traveled. Many people enjoy playing under the lights at night.

Evans, 38, worked in aquatics for five years before serving in her current capacity the last year and a half. She hasn’t taken up the sport because of limited time, but loves the concept as a former high school tennis player in Virginia.

“When I’ve played it, I can tell that I could definitely get addicted to it fast,” she said. “I probably will take it up when I get more (free) time in my life.”

They’ve started a rec side of it for youth to get involved. It’s also been incorporated into the home-schooled program. There is slow growth with the youth programs since they’re fairly new. But, the other programs are extremely popular, leading to more pickleball-related activities.

“We have the ‘Champions of the Court,’ where pickleball players come out and we see who is the last standing at the tournament,” Evans said. “Our fitness coordinator has recently started a pickleball conditioning program to build muscles in those areas. Anytime we throw pickleball



CONTRIBUTED

**Jen Balsbaugh gets ready to serve in a family game of pickleball at Memorial Park Community Center.**

in some kind of programming, it’s full in no time.”

Evans doesn’t think the trend will end anytime soon. It’s popular with those native to the area and especially with the influx of new people who have relocated to the Tri-Cities.

“When we started pickleball with the indoor courts, it blew up,” she said. “That’s what made us transform the tennis courts at Memorial Park. If we could build pickleball courts all over the city, they would fill up in little time. It’s very high demand.”

# Q&A with Washington County's new health director

By **ROBERT HOUK**  
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The new director of the Washington County Health Department aims to get the word out about the many services provided at the facility.

“My goal is to continue supporting the mission of the department, which is to protect, promote and improve the health and well-being of all people in Tennessee,” said Katie McClellan, who was appointed to the position in June.

McClellan said she is “excited to continue to build on the great work already being done by the great team members” at the health department, which is located at 219 Princeton Road in Johnson City.

She hopes to accomplish this “by expanding community outreach, increasing access to services and make sure we’re meeting people where they are with the care and resources they need.”

The following is a Q & A with McClellan that reveals more about her background and goals for the local health department.

**Tell us a bit about yourself, such as where did you grow up, where did you go to school and what led you to a career in public health?**

I was born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina, in a large, close knit family where I am the youngest of 16 grandchildren. I have always had a heart for service and education, which is what led me to public health.

As I learned more about what public health was, I was drawn



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**Katie McClellan was appointed director of the Washington County Health Department in June.**

to the idea of how our work can make sure a meaningful impact in our communities. Because of this, I decided to pursue and earn my undergraduate degree in public health from Charleston Southern University.

Wanting to grow both personally and professionally, I moved to Johnson City in 2019 to pursue my master of public health degree and graduated from East Tennessee State University’s College of Public Health in 2021.

I had always loved the idea of living in the mountains and after moving here, I quickly fell in love with the community and knew I wanted to make this my home.

**What have you learned from working with the health department that you might apply to your new role?**

I have currently worked for the department of health for a little over two years. In my previous role, I had the opportunity

to engage and work with all the health departments in the Northeast region.

This experience was able to give me insight on the structure of each health department and the opportunity to learn more in depth about each of the service areas we offer.

I am excited to utilize the information I have learned about all our services to support the staff at Washington County in continuing to provide great care to our patients.

**Do you anticipate growing any existing programs or adding new services to the health department?**

We continually strive to provide our patients with the best service possible and to meet them where they are. As a health department we are constantly looking for ways to provide outreach in the community, whether that is providing information at a community event, hosting a health fair or a vaccine

event to increase access to our services.

As a department as a whole, we are also looking into how we can utilize telehealth options more often to enhance access, as transportation can sometimes be a barrier to those receiving medical care.

**What do you want residents in Washington County to know about the services offered at the health department?**

The Washington County Health Department offers a wide variety of services for people who are insured, under-insured or uninsured. Many people are familiar with programs like Tennessee Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Program, but we provide so much more, including:

- Birth and death certificates
- Family planning services, including pregnancy testing, contraceptives, STI testing and treatment and wellness exams
- Tobacco cessation programs, including a program for pregnant individuals
- Immunizations for both children and adults
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# Phiniti AI gives assistance to doctors with health care AI tool

By OLIVIA PERRY  
operry@sixriversmedia.com

Doctors are gaining an assistant and the chance to get more personable with patients with Phiniti AI.

Wesley Combs, founder of Phiniti AI, said his AI software company's goal is focused on "how to make health care better."

Phiniti AI, based in Kingsport, allows a recording of the doctor's interactions with patients to be transcribed in real-time and then programmed into an overall medical note about the patient's concerns and needs.

"It listens to the entire conversation – ifs, ands, buts, anything about your grandma, your aunt – whatever a patient's going to say in a room," Combs said.

"It listens to all that stuff and it'll build a transcript. We have a transcript, and then we have a set of instructions that we run that transcript through that basically says, 'Hey, we're going to build a medical note that looks like this.'"

The medical note contains information such as the doctor's impression of the patient, the patient's plan regarding medical treat-

ment, what needs should be considered, data and lab results. The technology used to create the material, Combs said, gives the doctors an opportunity to turn away from being "data entry clerks" by clicking checkboxes for data and adds to their productivity levels.

"It's a lot of large language model stuff and a lot of AI listening, and then we try basically to build the most accurate note we can and save them all those clicks," Combs said.

Combs credited the success of the tool to AI, stating that everything Phiniti does wouldn't be possible without AI.

"AI is enabling things that we never thought possible," he said. "We're entering into a whole new component, the economy, everything of how things work ... AI is the only way that makes this possible. We've thought about this stuff before and it's always been a pipe dream, but now we're pretty close to it."

Though AI is crucial to Phiniti's success, Combs said there have been struggles in using AI. Part of it stems from people's lack of trust in AI in general, but on the technical side of the com-



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pany's tool, he said a lot of it has to do with making sure the programming is compliant to health care standards. "Some of the rest of it is all privacy and all that," Combs said. "Before you can get into health care and start doing this, you have to get all your contracting rights, business agreements, HIPAA stuff, you have to get all that lined out. All your policies, procedures, how you're protecting data – that's a challenge for anybody getting into health care, because there's a lot of requirements to be able to build this kind of software." Combs said another hurdle the company has faced is working with electronic health vendors because of their "protection" of their customers. He said the vendors also put many stipulations on allowing Phiniti to work with their clients.

"They control the marketplace because that's the tool doctors use on a daily basis, and a tool like mine has to work with a tool like that," Combs said.

"I want to give the doctors two separate tools that aren't connected together, and you want to give the best experience. The EHR vendors put all these hurdles in the way to do that – you have to get certified, you have to pay this monthly fee – for the company, that's a really burdensome thing to go through."

Though AI has its benefits and its obstacles, Combs said he believes the future of using AI should be to benefit people, adding he believes younger generations have the tech-savvy skills to utilize what AI can offer.

"It should make life better," he said. "We've got two futures in front of us; we've got a world of abundance, where everything's going to be better, and cheaper and faster, and then we've got cyberpunk. I pray that we go to the abundance side. I think the goal for AI should be to support humankind in what we actually need to do."

# MAIA makes a difference with mental health and job outlooks

By **OLIVIA PERRY**  
operry@sixriversmedia.com

Second chances and education are made possible with MAIA.

Ashley Shutt, co-founder and chief operating officer of Kingsport-based MAIA, said her startup company aids in giving groups of people needing a second opportunity at life the chance to find purpose in work. “Essentially what we did was we created a post-secondary educational school,” Shutt said. “The students that go to this school are people who have been disadvantaged in the workplace. So, we’re talking about second-chance employment, we’re talking about justice-impacted individuals (and) we’re talking about low income.”

Shutt said MAIA, an acronym for My AI Assistant, came to fruition by combining two different companies and then creating a tech aspect to help with education and job placement. Now, MAIA is partnered with companies like SHERM and CoreCivic to help underserved populations and those in the prison network have a life past their struggles.

“The first half of our programming is neuroplasticity,” Shutt said. “We have mental health partners that have technology, new science, where they can remap your brain in the matter of an hour.”

Shutt said neuroplasticity, which could take years, can now happen in a matter of an hour, a couple weeks or a few sessions.

Shutt said MAIA is the tool used within the gap between finishing the job placement courses with



CONTRIBUTED

## Ashley Shutt

the school and connecting a person to what their next life step is.

This is based on the program’s ability to discern what job would best match each individual depending on the courses they took and their mental and emotional well-being.

“It takes into account all of their mental health,” Shutt said. “They’ll have a quiz in an on-boarding sort of set of questionnaires. They’ll tell us where they’re at, and our technology will listen to that and build upon it to get them to where they need to be through our training.”

Though Shutt appreciates the advanced technology, she said there were some hurdles with using it, especially when it came to people who were skeptical of AI overall.

“AI is a blessing and a curse, and I think everyone will say that,” Shutt said. “Everyone is a little bit scared of AI.” She said AI is becoming something extremely prominent in today’s world and will eventually become something everyone uses for one thing or another, especially in the business world.

“You have to adopt AI – everyone is using AI in every industry, no matter what, always,” Shutt said. “People are not ready for full AI

yet, so my feeling is everyone’s going to adopt AI no matter what, so saying that it’s AI is redundant. Everything will be AI. From where I stand, right now I think it’s a positive, and in about two years I think it’s going to be an alienating factor.”

Despite the AI tools being seen as intimidating to some, Shutt said her appreciation for AI and how it is used for MAIA comes from the human aspect behind the technology that helps give people second chances.

“Everything (with MAIA) has been considered to appeal to a person who has not had somebody care about them, but now does,” Shutt said. “That’s not the

tech. The tech of MAIA is not what cares about the people, it’s the human thinking that went into designing the tech that ensures that the humanness of the experience is not lost.”

She added it was imperative to remember the people using AI are what make the technology’s results in helping others successful, not the technology itself.

“There’s a lot of problems in the world that could be solved with speed, somebody who cared and AI,” said Shutt. “AI could solve world hunger if somebody just cared enough to do that. It’s really just what you use it for. You’re the potter, and AI is the clay.”

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# Warning signs of colon cancer

By **ALLISON WINTERS**  
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**K**INGSFORT— The U.S. Preventative Services Task Force put out a new recommendation in 2021 encouraging people to screen for colorectal cancer five years earlier than before.

Dr. Yonette Paul-Ennis, who practices in Kingsport, said she has seen a trend in younger patients being diagnosed with colorectal cancer — mostly in their 30s or 40s. She works at the Ballad Health Cancer Center, where she treats blood disorders as well as cancers.

“I think I would agree that these patients are presenting later than my older patients,” she said. “You find that the older patients are having a colonoscopy, so they’re fighting earlier stages, stage one. They don’t have symptoms at the time, they’re just going in because they’re supposed to get a colonoscopy.”

She said the younger folks are coming in for screenings because they are experiencing symptoms, which usually means the cancer is at a later state.

In terms of symptoms, Paul-Ennis said these can range from specific to non-specific. That includes anemia, changes in bowel habits, abdominal pain, bloating, weight loss and loss of appetite.

Most importantly, she said, young people should be sure to pay attention to health trends even if it seems unlikely for someone their age to experience it. The National Cancer Institute reported 154,270 estimated new cases of colorectal cancer in 2025.

“Sometimes we may say, ‘Oh,



CONTRIBUTED/BALLAD HEALTH

## Dr. Yonette Paul-Ennis

you’re too young. It’s probably hemorrhoids, and minimize symptoms,” she said. “So not to minimize things, especially if they are persistent.”

She encouraged community members with a family history of colorectal cancer to screen early for signs. Having a primary care provider can also make it easier to diagnose what’s going on from the start.

“Even though you’re young, having a primary care provider that you can access readily is a good idea. It can sometimes take months, especially in rural areas where there’s healthcare provider shortages, to actually get into a new appointment,” she said.

Paul-Ennis said Ballad also offers a genetics clinic at the cancer center, which is helpful to those who feel they are genetically more predisposed to certain types of cancer. Those interested can refer themselves for the clinic or have a primary care provider refer them.

“It’s not only for colon cancer, it’s for all different types of cancers,” she said. “And that’s very empowering information, because people who know that they have genetic cancer syndromes can screen earlier, and they can screen for other different types of cancers.”

# TDH addresses changing demographics

By **BEN SMITH**  
bensmith@sixriversmedia.com

**N**ASHVILLE — The number of older Tennesseans is increasing.

A 2022 report from the Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury indicated that the number of Tennesseans aged 65 and older will increase by 30% from 2020 to 2040, with the number of those aged 80 and older doubling in that time.

As such, resources have to change with shifting demographics. And that’s where the Office of Healthy Aging (OHA) comes into play.

Part of the Tennessee Department of Health, the OHA was established in 2024 as a means to address the rapidly aging Tennessee population.

“Our goal is to create innovative strategies, policies, and programs over the next 15-to-20 years to meet the evolving needs of aging Tennesseans,” said Tennessee Health Commissioner Ralph Alvarado upon establishing the office.

A primary goal of the OHA involves developing age-friendly ecosystems: establishing supportive environments throughout workplaces, universities, hospitals, communities and other sectors to help enhance the quality of life of aging adults.

That might involve a university launching a research project to compile data on aging populations, such as TennCare and East Tennessee State University’s

Aging Data Dashboard.

Or, it could be a community with a greater number of public transit options. It could also include healthcare systems that have aligned with certain evidence-based interventions for older adults — such as the Mountain Home and Johnson City Veterans’ Affairs Medical Centers.

Part of the OHA’s mission involves developing plans for county and regional health departments to earn the “Age-Friendly Public Health System” designation from the AFPHS Initiative.

Seven health departments in Northeast Tennessee have been recognized as age-friendly public health systems: Washington, Carter, Unicoi, Johnson, Hancock, Hawkins and Greene County health departments — everywhere but Sullivan County.

Some requirements necessary for a health department to earn this designation include leading policy and systems change; implementing healthy aging strategies; and collaborating with other state and local health departments.

Other initiatives by the Office of Healthy Aging include measures aimed at strengthening Tennessee’s ability to help its residents living with dementia.

This includes expanding education efforts for healthcare providers; establishing a statewide Dementia Navigator Program with local health departments; and pursuing federal funding for dementia programs.

# Providence expands mobile clinics to reach uninsured adults



REBEKAH MCNERNEY/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**Providence Medical Clinic provides care to uninsured adults who fall below 150% of the federal poverty level. They have expanded their reach by offering a fleet of mobile medical clinics.**

By **REBEKAH MCNERNEY**  
rmcnerney@sixriversmedia.com

**K**INGSFORT— For those without insurance or stable housing, health care is often out of reach.

That's where mobile clinics are helping to fill the gaps in access by delivering care directly to underserved populations.

Providence Medical Clinic, based in Kingsport, is one non-profit doing exactly that. The clinic, which serves adults ages 18 to 65 who are uninsured and fall below 150% of the federal poverty level, has expanded its reach across the region through a fleet of mobile medical clinics.

"The services we provide through the mobile clinics are exactly the same as what we offer at our brick-and-mortar clinic," said Kim Hart, executive director of the clinic. "The only exceptions are vision and a couple of specialty services, but we'll transport patients to our main clinic if they need those."

That level of commitment allows Providence to reach people where they are, Hart said. From

mammograms and podiatry to dermatology and pulmonary care, a wide range of services are rotated into the mobile schedule depending on local need.

For example, an upcoming clinic in Greene County will offer dermatology services, with a September clinic expected to include mammograms and more.

"When we first enter a community, we may only see around 10 patients," Hart explained. "But once we're established, we can see 15 to 20 patients each time. And of those, five to 10 are usually new."

Many of the people Providence serves haven't had regular health care in years, if ever. When they finally sit down with a medical provider, Hart says the effects of prolonged neglect become apparent.

"There's rarely just one thing wrong," she said. "We're seeing people with diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol—all at once. Education is huge.

"We have to help them under-

stand their bodies to help them take care of themselves."

And they do often come back for medications, follow-ups and continued support.

Hart said at each mobile clinic, tables are set up with free hygiene items, walkers, adult briefs, snacks and other essentials. Patients are also offered the chance to speak with volunteer "encouragers," who provide spiritual support and help identify other unmet needs, like food or utilities.

"If they want prayer, someone will pray with them. If they

just want to talk, someone will listen," Hart said. "And through that, we often find out about the deeper struggles they're facing."

No one is turned away on their first visit, even if they fall outside Providence's strict income guidelines, Hart said. Staff work to connect them with other providers who offer sliding-scale services.

"Some of our patients are working, but they don't make enough or aren't offered insurance," Hart added. "They fall through the cracks. That's where we come in."

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# A regional vaccine overview

By **ALLISON WINTERS**  
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and **BEN SMITH**  
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**V**accinations continue to be an important part of healthy living for community members of all ages in Northeast Tennessee. The Sullivan County Regional Health Department, or SCRHD, follows Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines when it comes to vaccine requirements, according to its website. With school starting again, it is important for young children to be up-to-date on their vaccines.

## Vaccine recommendations

Vaccine recommendations vary depending on age group, recent travels and other health factors. In addition, children are required to be vaccinated against certain diseases in order to enroll in childcare and public schools.

The SCRHD has a full list on its website detailing the vaccines required for children to enroll in public schools, as well as a schedule dictating what age they should be administered. Required vaccines include shots for measles, Hepatitis B and RSV.

Vaccine recommendations can also be found on

the CDC website.

For adults, SCRHD recommends a tetanus booster once every 10 years, once every pregnancy and once with every injury.

In addition, the department recommends adults 65 and older receive a pneumococcal vaccine, and those up to 26 years-old are encouraged to receive three doses of an HPV vaccine. Adults who have only received a single chickenpox vaccine dose are recommended to receive another two-dose series.

The department also recommends a flu vaccine every year during flu season, which begins in November and peaks in January and February. The CDC recommends routine vaccinations of the 2024-2025 COVID-19 vaccine, especially for adults 65 and older; anyone at a high risk for severe COVID-19; and anyone 19 and older who has never received a COVID-19 vaccine.

Other vaccinations, such as HPV, shingles and chickenpox, are recommended based on certain factors such as age, pre-existing conditions and some life events.

Vaccines for Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, Tetanus, MMR, Meningococcal,

chicken pox, typhoid, polio and yellow fever are also available at the SCRHD for those preparing for international travel.

## Local data

A school with a Kindergarten Immunization Compliance Assessment of above 95% remains at a lower risk of a vaccine-preventable disease outbreak, according to the Tennessee Department of Health. This includes infectious diseases like measles, chicken pox and whooping cough.

In Northeast Tennessee for the 2024-2025 school year, counties ranged anywhere from 88% to 96% for the compliance assessment. According to TDH's data, Unicoi County ranked the highest at 96.1% for that year, followed by Sullivan County at 93.9%.

Hawkins County received an immunization compliance assessment rate of 93.5%, with Washington County at 92.9% and Carter County at 92.4%. Johnson County's rate was the lowest at 88.4%.

## Where to find vaccines

The Washington County Health Department offers immunizations at their

main site at 219 Princeton Road in Johnson City, along with various other services. Similarly, the Sullivan County Regional Health Department has locations in Kingsport, at 1041 E. Sullivan St., and Blountville, at 154 Blountville Bypass.

Other regional or county health departments are:

- Hawkins County Health Department: two locations, one at 201 Park Blvd in Rogersville, the other at 247 Silver Lake Road, Church Hill;
  - Carter County Health Department, 403 E. G St., Elizabethton;
  - Unicoi County Health Department, 101 Okolona Drive, Erwin; and
  - Johnson County Health Department, 715 W. Main St., Mountain City;
- For SCRHD, immunizations are available on an income-based sliding scale. Some children are eligible for free vaccines.

Visit [vaccines.gov](https://www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/localdepartments/north-east-region.html) to find a pharmacy or another vaccine provider in your area. For a more comprehensive list of health departments and contact information, visit <https://www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/localdepartments/north-east-region.html>.



# What to know about your tap water

By **JORGELINA MANNA-REA**  
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**T**ap water in Northeast Tennessee meets federal drinking water standards. Some organizations don't think those standards are high enough.

Northeast Tennessee's drinking water abides by federal standards, according to data gathered by the Environmental Working Group up to 2024.

But the EWG has its own standards for what levels of contamination are safe, which the region's drinking water largely doesn't meet. Those standards are higher than the ones outlined by the EPA.

Many of the contaminants EWG identifies in local drinking water are byproducts of disinfectants used to treat the drinking water itself. EWG considers those byproducts contaminants because they could increase risk of certain cancers. Many of these are not regulated by the EPA, according to EWG.

Other contaminants could be naturally occurring from ground water or caused by industrial pollution, agricultural runoff or discharges from wastewater plants and septic tanks.

It wouldn't be the first time scientists and environmental groups have suggested that EPA drinking water standards are outdated.

The EPA uses three criteria to regulate certain contaminants: if it would have an adverse effect on someone's health, if there's a high chance it could be in a system at a level high enough for concern and if regulation could reduce risk for people who depend on public water systems.

Kingsport Water Department and Johnson City water quality reports are all available online.

The Partnership for Safe Water program granted the Kingsport Water Department an award for its efforts to maintain water at a standard higher than what federal regulations require.

Last year, the EPA announced it would require lead pipes to be identified and replaced in drinking water systems across the country within the next 10 years.

The state of Tennessee is also offering \$246 million in loans and grants to subsidize those replacements.

If you want to do something of your own for your tap water, even if you rely on a public water system, at-home filtering is an option. You can test your tap water with a water test kit before choosing a filtration system.

Different water filtering systems perform different functions. One of the main things you should consider, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is if a system filters out viruses and bacteria.

Water filtration systems include:

## Carbon Filters

These filters trap and remove contaminants as water flows through them. Their effectiveness varies on the type of carbon filter used. They usually improve the taste and smell of your water, but don't necessarily ensure germs or contaminants are completely filtered out, according to the CDC.

These are typically water pitchers

and refrigerator filters.

## Reverse Osmosis

This filtration process puts tap water under enough pressure that pushes it through a membrane that will only allow particles the size of water molecules through it.

Reverse osmosis systems that are installed in a home usually put water through a carbon filter, then reverse osmosis.

While they can be effective at removing contaminants, these systems may also remove minerals that are beneficial to health in the process.

## Distillation

Distillation turns water from its liquid form to steam, and condenses it back into a liquid again. It is not the same as boiling water.

Distilling water will remove bacteria and viruses, but certain chemicals that can contaminate water have a higher boiling point. Other minerals that are good for health are removed during this process, as well.

## UV Filters

UV filters use ultraviolet light to destroy bacteria. It does not require heat or other chemicals.

Some filtration systems are more arduous to implement or install than others. You should decide what you need after testing your water.

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# The heart of the Appalachians: Exploring Johnson County's stretch of the AT

By LILY JOHNSON

The Appalachian Trail (AT) is often thought of as a test of endurance — stretching over 2,190 miles from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Mount Katahdin in Maine. But nestled in the high ridges and quiet valleys of Johnson County lies a stretch of the AT that proves hiking doesn't have to be extreme to be extraordinary.

This roughly 30-mile section of the trail winds through forests, farmland and mountaintops, offering something special for every hiker — from first timers to AT thru-hikers.

Osborne Farm near TN-91 in Shady Valley offers one of the most accessible and scenic sections of the AT. It winds gently through rolling pastures with even a wheelchair accessible starting point. It offers views of Iron Mountain



LILY JOHNSON/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**The Grays Lily blooms atop Roan Mountain on the Appalachian Trail.**



LILY JOHNSON/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**Hiking on the Appalachian Trail up to Carvers Gap and the Doe Valley.**

Other noteworthy stops along the trail include Cross Mountain, Rich Knob and Locust Knob. But, in this part of the Appalachians, adventure waits around every bend.

Warren Doyle, a longtime resident of Mountain City, has hiked the AT 18 times. Originally from Connecticut, Doyle found his true home in the southern Appalachians. "People live where their values are," he said.

Though a passionate advocate for life on the trail, Doyle says he never encourages anyone to thru-hike the AT unless they are sure of their decision. "I don't want to be responsible for their pain and suffering," he said.

For those wanting a more extensive experience, Doyle shares his expertise through the Appalachian Trail Institute. It's a five-day, donation-based program designed to provide realistic, practical preparation for those aspiring to thru-hike.

The program is held five times a year in Mountain City, and has welcomed over 2,000 hikers from 45 states. It includes classroom instruction led by Doyle, lodging in bunkhouses and diagnostic hikes that allow people to test their readiness for the 2,000-mile journey.

Doyle notes that those who do choose to hike the trail will experience an incredible range of natural diversity within this region alone.

"From Carvers Gap, from the Rhododendron gardens, to the spruce forests, to the balds, to the old farming pastures, to thickets, moss, ferns, a gorge, Laurel Fork Gorge in Hampton, sedimentary rock, to the lake," he said.

Ultimately, like many, he believes the trail is more than a path — it's a teacher.

"Once you accept the difficult and you're a guest in the trail's house, you finally give up your control and realize you have given the trail permission to mold you," he said.

It's that surrender, he suggests, where the real journey begins.



LILY JOHNSON/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**Hiking along the Hampton Trailhead on the Appalachian Trail.**



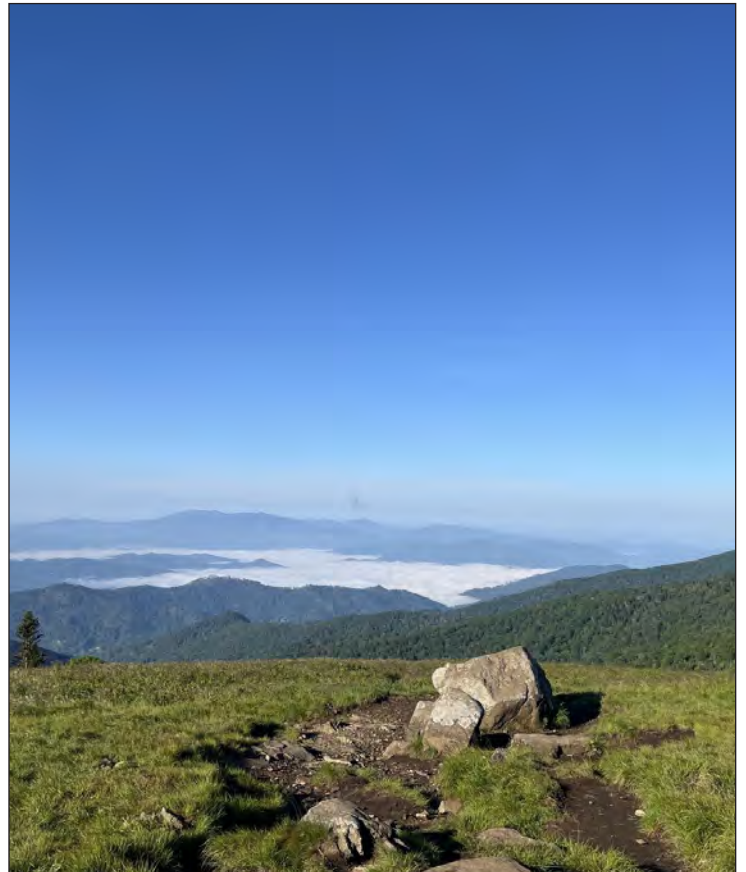
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**The Appalachian Trail is marked with white rectangular blazes across the 2,190 mile stretch.**



LILY JOHNSON/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**Hiking up Carvers Gap on the Appalachian Trail.**



LILY JOHNSON/SIX RIVERS MEDIA

**Views from Round Bald on Carvers Gap on the Appalachian Trail.**

# Governor's Bend offers diverse activities for residents



CONTRIBUTED

Two men enjoy a lunch at the monthly Men's Fellowship at Governor's Bend.

By **BRYAN STEVENS**  
bstevens@sixriversmedia.com

There's never a dull moment for residents of Governor's Bend, an assisted living

facility in Erwin.

That's largely due to the work of Kimberly Harrell, the activities director for Governor's Bend. When she plans activities for residents she likes to choose fun pursuits that offer ways to keep participants both physically and mentally active.

Harrell, who has been with Governor's Bend for four years, shared that she loves coming up with new ideas to help engage residents. "So we take lots of things into consideration," she said about the planning of activities. "We love to be able to work their brain and do physical activity to accommodate all of our residents."

She arranges monthly calendars of events that in-

corporate holidays, special events and much more. Resident birthdays are celebrated on a monthly basis at an event that has been named "Bingo Birthday Bash." The celebration incorporates bingo games with prizes along with cake, punch and the singing of "Happy Birthday" to all the residents celebrating a birthday for the month.

"They really like it," Harrell said. "We decorate the dining room and make it special."

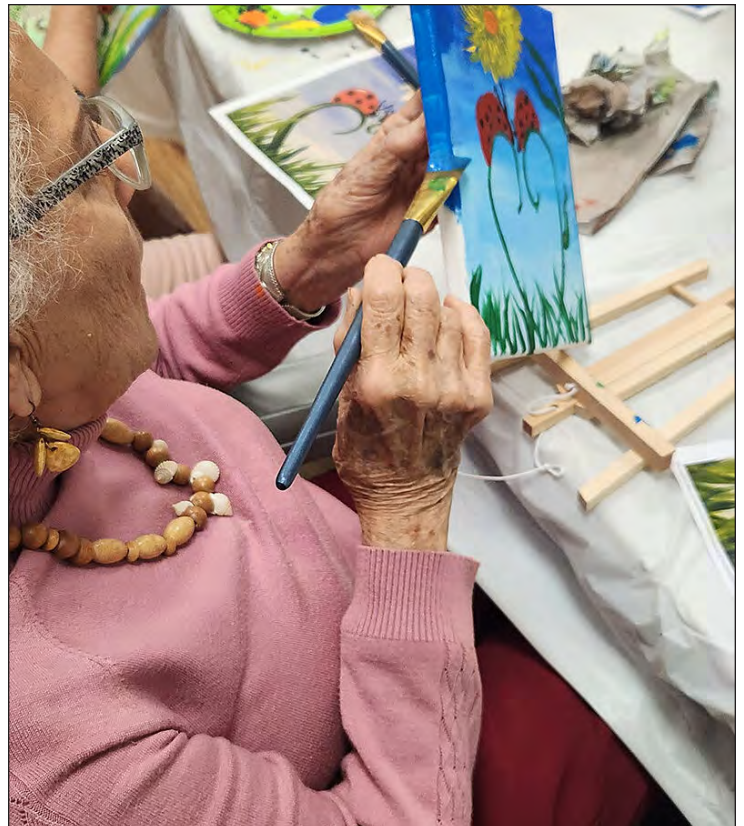
Upcoming activities at Governor's Bend include a history tour of downtown Erwin. "I'm going to be their tour guide," Harrell said.

The tour arose from regular programs on local history that Harrell presents through Powerpoint programs. The tour is scheduled for Tuesday, Aug. 19. Activities also include music, including gospel hymns and special performances of music from the 1950s and 1960s.



CONTRIBUTED

A resident gets into the festive spirit for a Hawaiian luau party at Governor's Bend.



CONTRIBUTED

A resident tries her hand at creating a work of art during a class at Governor's Bend.



CONTRIBUTED

Residents show off their sunflowers crafted using old rag scraps and canning jar rings.

## BEND:

From Page M20

“We have Bible studies every week and two church services a week,” Harrell added.

Family parties are held

around such holidays as Christmas, Thanksgiving and Easter when residents and their families can celebrate together.

A variety of crafting sessions are held. Harrell said she likes to make sure that the craft made is something residents can take back to



CONTRIBUTED

A music lesson on a dulcimer provides an interesting diversion for a Governor’s Bend resident.



CONTRIBUTED

Residents enjoy a festive Fourth of July observance at Governor’s Bend in Erwin.

their apartments to enjoy.

“They love trivia,” Harrell said. “Noodle ball is a favorite. Chair volleyball is one they really enjoy.” Noodle ball involves the use of pool noodles and balloons and encourages hand to eye coordination and other low-impact physical activity.

Other events that Harrell has planned for residents have included summer cookouts, shopping trips and a visit to the scenic overlook along Interstate 26.

“We have a men’s fellowship once a month,” Harrell said.

“I just like to have a variety of activities and always try to come up with new ideas,” she added.

Eva Rector, executive di-

rector of Governor’s Bend, praised Harrell’s creativity with activity planning. “I am very proud of our activity program here,” Rector said. “Our residents are all unique. We try to hone in on their individual interests.”

Residents also have input into the planning of activities. “They can share ideas at our Residents Council,” Rector said.

Some other upcoming activities include a State Fair Day in August and a tour of the Erwin National Fish Hatchery and the facility’s own version of “Shark Week.” There will also be the observation of Assisted Living Week in September.

Governor’s Bend is located at 1631 Zane Whitson Drive, Erwin. The phone number is (423) 330-6800.

# How evidence-based therapies help rewire the mind and body

By CHLOE CAMPBELL

Contributed from Frontier Health

Trauma is not only about what happened—it's about how your mind and body responded. Whether caused by a single incident, like an accident, or prolonged adversity, like childhood neglect, trauma can overwhelm your ability to cope and affect all aspects of your well-being.

At Frontier Health, we are committed to treating trauma at its roots using the most effective, evidence-based practices. These approaches unlock pathways to hope and healing for individuals and families throughout our region.

## Understanding Trauma and Its Impact on Wellness

Trauma is an emotional response to distressing events, such as abuse, loss, violence or disaster. It is deeply personal: two people can experience the same

event but respond very differently. Trauma can also be collective, shaped by culture or community.

Its effects can touch every dimension of wellness:

- **Mental:** Conditions like PTSD, anxiety, depression and substance use.
- **Physical:** Greater risk for chronic issues, including heart disease and autoimmune problems.
- **Social:** Disrupted relationships, isolation and loss of trust.
- **Behavioral:** Negative coping patterns such as addiction or self-harm.
- **Occupational:** Challenges with work, school or daily tasks.

Without timely, trauma-informed support, these effects can build up over time. Early intervention with the right therapy makes a real difference.



## Evidence-Based Treatments: What Are They?

Evidence-based practices (EBPs) are trauma therapies proven effective through research. At Frontier Health, we offer two leading approaches:

- Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)
- Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)

Both are recognized for reducing trauma's impact and helping people find lasting relief.

Frontier Health is setting a new standard for trauma treatment across Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia. Every therapist is intensely trained in at least one

evidence-based trauma modality, ensuring all individuals receive care rooted in science and compassion.

## What to Expect: EMDR and TF-CBT at Frontier Health

Your healing journey at Frontier Health is supported by skilled therapists committed to your well-being.

- **EMDR:** This structured, therapist-led therapy guides you through processing traumatic memories in a safe, supportive setting. With EMDR, you will recall distressing memories while following gentle, guided eye movements or similar bilateral stimulation. This helps your brain “unstick” the trauma, lessening its emotional

See **FRONTIER**, Page M23

# FRONTIER:

From Page M22

hold. EMDR is globally recognized for its effectiveness and does not require you to share every detail of your experience.

- **TF-CBT:** Ideal for children, adolescents and families, TF-CBT provides practical skills for managing distress, reshaping negative thought patterns and safely working through difficult memories. This therapy includes education about trauma, emotional regulation strategies and healthy coping skills — all built on a trusting partnership with your therapist. TF-CBT is strengths-based, adaptable and empowers you to take charge of your healing.

Both EMDR and TF-CBT are non-invasive, evidence-based and tailored to meet the unique needs of every person and family.

**The Frontier Health Foundation: Bringing Healing to More People**

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Foundation powers this progress, raising awareness, securing philanthropic support and closing funding gaps. Foundation-supported grants and donations help train therapists, provide clinical resources and make trauma-informed care accessible in rural and underserved communities. When you support the Foundation, you help bring proven, high-quality care to those who need it most.

## Healing Is Possible

Trauma may shape the past, but with the proper care, it does not have to define the future. Frontier Health is here to help — empowering you with evidence-based approaches like EMDR and TF-CBT, led by exceptional, compassionate professionals.

To learn more about the Frontier Health Foundation or to support our mission to expand trauma-informed care, visit [FrontierHealthFoundation.org](http://FrontierHealthFoundation.org).



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# Unicoi County takes different approach with football



CONTRIBUTED

**Unicoi County coach Drew Rice uses Riddell helmets exclusively for his players.**

By **JEFF BIRCHFIELD**  
jbirchfield@sixriversmedia.com

**E**RWIN— Unicoi County High School football coach Drew Rice doesn't claim to be right, but the numbers have worked out so far.

With the numbers down in the youth football program and seeing a team unable to finish the season due to injuries, there was a drastic change in the way the folks in Erwin approached the game. The school and youth programs partnered and joined with NFL FLAG football.

Now, the kids in Unicoi County don't start full-contact football until sixth grade. It's the advice of most doctors, who recommend starting at the later age due to brain development and concussion risks.

"I'm not going to sit here and say we've got it figured out. A kid that's maybe played football in a good organization has been coached, they're probably a little bit ahead of our kids, but they're 11 years old," Rice said. "(Starting quarterback) Kolby Jones was in fourth grade and (wide receivers) Aidyn Evely and Avery Hatcher were in third grade when we started that. You watch them play right now, and they don't look like they're behind."

Rice said being involved with the NFL FLAG program gives it credibility. They're furnished with jerseys, flags and other nice items. It's helped attract many more players to the youth leagues.

"Our numbers have certainly benefited from it, and the middle school's numbers have certainly benefited from it," Rice said. "You don't have the burden of getting kids to pay for this and that, so it's been good for us."

The coach sees the NFL FLAG program helping kids at positions on the offensive and defensive line. He uses the example



EARL NEIKIRK

**Unicoi County wide receiver looks to break a tackle against a Claiborne defender in a 2024 game.**

of Carter Simmons, who is projected to be a top lineman for the Blue Devils this season.

"Carter played in it, and he's a bigger kid, but he ran and caught and did all these things," Rice said. "Now he's a lineman, but he's a super skilled one."

He's got great hand-eye coordination. He's great with his hands, his feet."

While it's helped financially, Rice points out that Unicoi County has always

made sure they never wavered on providing players with the best equipment. When they're ordering for the different high school and middle school players, Rice trusts one brand.

"As far as my knowledge, we've never had anything other than Riddell helmets and Riddell shoulder pads, which are the best," he said. "That's what guys on Sunday are wearing. That's what UT is wearing. Now we've got a lot more kids

See **UNICOI**, Page M27

# UNICOI:

From Page M26



CONTRIBUTED

**Riddell is the brand of shoulder pads used by the Unicoi County football program.**

that we got to buy for, but we've never wavered on that."

After every season, the helmets are sent off to Riddell and tested to make sure they're okay. The helmets are reconditioned or fitted with new parts in most cases. If they're damaged, they're taken out of use.

Rice graduated from Unicoi County High School in 2008, and from Carson-Newman University in 2012. The helmets have seen some changes since he was playing tight end.

"When Riddell gets a helmet they like, if it's not broke, they're not going to break it," Rice said. "The flex helmet, it's been a staple for a long time, probably six or seven years. Be-

fore that, it was the speed helmet. The first person I remember wearing that was Peyton Manning."

College, professional and even some high school teams have also started wearing Guardian caps, the shields over helmets seen in practice and in some cases, games. Unicoi County doesn't do a lot of contact before games, but Rice ordered one for a player because of a specific reason.

"We don't wear those all the time because we try to be real smart with how we practice," Rice said.

"We did have a young man last year who had got a concussion in a car wreck his junior year. He was (a) super aggres-

sive kid, and a real heavy striker. We did get one for him to wear in practice, just as a precaution. Never had any issues, but a lot of people wear them."

Perhaps the biggest change over the years is the way the team practices. There isn't the same amount of hard contact as years past. Gone is the Oklahoma drill, which focused on high-impact, one-on-one collisions. It was banned from NFL practices in 2019.

"People used to raise their eyebrow at this, but we don't go to the ground in practice," Rice said. "Call it right, call it wrong. But we're working on tackling every day and still doing that, staying up or using dummies or pads or whatever it may be. Every now and then we'll do like a one-on-one, just kind of thudding up, driving and still staying off the ground. It's a great drill, just to kind of see where guys are at."

Rice's approach is to get the guys to game day healthy, or as he calls it, getting your horses to the race. They still have meaningful practice working on skills like blocking. He just wants to minimize the risk and opportunities for injury.

Part of that is working with strength and conditioning coach Mark Peterson. They focus on movements like players being in control of their bodies, starting, stopping, moving left and right, jumping and landing.

"We talk about non-contact injuries, and coach Peterson, he's awesome," Rice said. "He's been ahead of the curve over the last eight years, and what he's had our guys do has been a credit to him. Our approach has been to build toughness in the weight room and if you're trying to do that in two weeks when you put pads on, it's probably too late."



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# Dental care access increasing in SWVA, East Tennessee

By **MIKE STILL**  
mstill@sixriversmedia.com

**A** BINGDON— A quarter century ago, the need for dental services in far Southwest Virginia and East Tennessee was highlighted by lines of people waiting to have teeth pulled in an airport hangar in Wise.

Ongoing free summer dental clinics through The Health Wagon, the Virginia Dental Association Foundation and Appalachian Miles for Smiles have helped build improved care access through a series of community clinics in the region.

Elaine Garrison Smith, director of the Appalachian Highlands Community Dental Center in Abingdon, and Dr. Emily Bowen of Mountain Empire Community College's dental assistant program agree that more people are able to get regular dental care without having to wait for annual events like the Health Wagon-Remote Area Medical summer clinic and its evolution into smaller events.

Appalachian Highlands opened in March 2020. Smith said it has handled more than 35,500 patient

visits over five years – a third of the five-year total in fiscal year 2025.

The Health Wagon opened its own Owens and Hill Dental Clinic in Wise two years ago, while Kingsport-based Appalachian Miles for Smiles continues operating its mobile dental vans in cooperation with other organizations across the region.

Healing Hands Health in Bristol, Tennessee operates another clinic, and Lincoln Memorial University's dental school students work with area clinics and dental events.

Smith said that having dental students and students from dental assistant and hygienist programs at Mountain Empire and Wytheville Community Colleges at East Tennessee State University has been key to expanding care access. Appalachian Highlands began with one dental resident in 2020 and now has seven, she said. The center also has three to four dental hygienists on duty daily, and some students from Wytheville and Mountain Empire do clinicals at the center before gaining certification.



MIKE STILL/KINGSPORT TIMES NEWS

**Appalachian Highlands Community Dental Center director Elaine Smith, left, at a school dental outreach event.**

While the Virginia Dental Association Foundation's Mission of Mercy summer clinic had patient counts in the thousands in the early 2000s, Smith said that has dropped in recent years. The demand for extractions has also trended down, thanks in part to better care access and patient education.

"Educating patients is critical," said Smith. "We have three to four hygienists here every day and they're educating patients on how teeth can be saved."

Even with more clinics in the area, Bowen said far Southwest Virginia still has a ratio of dentists to residents lower than the statewide level. That level stands at approximately 29 dentists per 100,000 people, Smith said, while more urban parts of Virginia have higher ratios.

Recruiting more dentists, assistants and hygienists to stay in the region is key to sustaining care access,

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# DENTAL:

From Page M28

Smith and Bowen agreed. Dentistry and dental hygiene career opportunities are plentiful in Southwest Virginia, Bowen said, but the number of in-state dental schools and dental assistant/hygienist programs is smaller than in neighboring Tennessee, Kentucky and North Carolina.

Virginia Commonwealth University has the only state university dental school, Bowen said. Dental hygienist programs are offered at VCU, Wytheville Community College and four other community colleges.

“We’ve had 29 residents come through Appalachian Highlands and eight have stayed in the region,” said Smith. “That’s what we want to see more of. Access to care is definitely better that it was five years ago because of places like us, but there still is a shortage of the staffing we need.”

## Area dental clinics

The Health Wagon Owens and Hill Dental Clinic — <https://thehealthwagon.org/owens-and-hill-dental-clinic/>  
5626 Patriot Dr.  
Wise  
(276) 328-8850

Appalachian Highlands Community Dental Center — <https://www.appalachianhighlandsdental.com>  
616 Campus Drive, Suite 100  
Abingdon  
(276) 525-4487

Appalachian Miles for Smiles — <https://amfsmiles.net>  
When not traveling, offering dental clinic services:  
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Dental work Wednesday – Friday  
(423) 230-8888

Healing Hands Health — <https://www.healinghandshhealth.org>  
245 Midway Medical Park  
Bristol, Tennessee  
Phone: (423) 652-0260  
Monday – Friday 7:45 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.  
Closed noon to 12:45 p.m.

Clinch River Health Services — <https://www.crhealth.org>  
Dental services are not provided on-site at Clinch River Health Services. However, a Family Dental Program is available to eligible patients. Services provided include:  
Emergency services  
Extractions  
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Information: (276) 467-2201



MIKE STILL/KINGSPORT TIMES NEWS

**Dr. Emily Bowen, director of Mountain Empire Community College's dental assistant program, brought 10 program students and three Wytheville Community College dental hygienist students to help at Friday's Mission of Mercy free dental clinic at UVA Wise. MECC students Zoey Fleming, rear center, and Marjorie Ollerton assist with a patient.**

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# Dr. Marta Wayt: The power and priority of preventive care

By DR. MARTA WAYT

CONTRIBUTED FROM BALLAD HEALTH

In my role as a practicing physician at Ballad Health, I see patients with a variety of medical histories and health goals. Although each situation is different, one thing I suggest to everyone, no matter what, is to focus on preventing problems before they start. While many seek medical attention when they feel unwell or are managing ongoing health issues, I stress the importance of preventive health care.

Preventive care is the key to maintaining your health and detecting problems early, before they become difficult to treat. Proactively taking charge of your well-being can help maintain your health, so you can live a happier, longer life.

## WHAT IS PREVENTIVE CARE?

Preventive care refers to everything you do to stay healthy before you get sick. This can include regular exercise, eating right, attending annual wellness checks with your primary care physician, vaccinations and managing your chronic conditions.

Most preventive visits and services are fully covered by insurance providers or are available at a free or reduced cost. Being engaged with preventive care can also make it easier and more efficient to handle other health conditions.

## TYPES OF PREVENTIVE CARE

There are a variety of ways you can partake in preventive care, including:

- **Wellness checkups:**

Regular visits to a primary care provider, usually annually, help identify emerging health issues and ensure



NATHAN MAYS

Dr. Marta Wayt

overall well-being. These checkups often include screenings for conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes and high cholesterol. Wellness checkups also give you a chance to bring up any concerns and address them proactively.

- **Cancer screenings:**

Cancer is most treatable when it's in the early stages – but that can also be when it's most easily missed. Because of this, proactive screenings are recommended for several cancers, such as:

# BALLAD:

From Page M30

- Breast cancer screening using 3D and digital mammography
- Pap and human papillomavirus (HPV) tests for cervical cancer
- Colorectal cancer screening
- Low-dose CT lung scan
- PSA test for prostate cancer

## • Immunizations:

Vaccines are safe and effective at fighting preventable diseases. Keeping your immunizations up to date is a great way to ensure you, as well as your friends and neighbors, are protected. In addition to typical child and adult vaccines, most primary care clinics also offer flu, pneumonia, tetanus and shingles vaccines.

## • Counseling:

Behavioral health services such as therapy and wellness groups can preserve your emotional well-being and improve stress and anxiety

throughout your life. Taking a proactive approach to your mental health can also help to reduce physical symptoms that can result from increased stress, such as high blood pressure and weight fluctuation.

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR HEALTH HISTORY

Knowing personal and family medical backgrounds is integral to proactive healthcare. Having a family history of an illness puts you at a higher risk of developing it yourself.

While you cannot change your genetic risk, knowledge is a powerful tool in preventive health. You can participate in health screenings earlier and be conscious of warning signs by talking to a primary care provider about your family history.

Prioritizing preventive care transcends mere health maintenance – it embodies a proactive commitment to personal well-being. By embracing these strategies, you can

safeguard your health and foster resilience against future health challenges.

Dr. Marta Wayt, a board-certified physician in Kingsport, holds a Physician Executive certification and an MBA from the University of Tennessee. With two decades of experience, she's held multiple leadership roles, including president of Holston Valley Medical Center's medical staff, and chair of

the Ballad Health Clinical Council.

Currently, she serves as chair of the Ballad Health Quality Committee, President of the Appalachian Highlands Clinically Integrated Network and as a member of the Ballad Health Board of Directors. Dr. Wayt has received accolades such as the Scott and Nikki Niswonger Servant's Heart Award and is committed to medical education and community service.

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# "Healthy students learn better": K-12 schools encourage wellness

By **BRANDON PAYKAMIAN**  
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Students who participate in regular physical activity score up to 40% higher on exams and have better attendance, according to research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

With data such as this in mind, a new state law passed earlier this year requires all K-12 public school systems in Tennessee to provide 40 minutes of physical activity each full school day.

Johnson City Schools and Washington County Schools leaders say they've already noted the need through programming that emphasizes the connection between overall student health and academic performance.

## Johnson City Schools

Johnson City Schools Health Coordinator Jennifer Norton said the local school district takes a holistic approach to student health, which begins by assessing each school's needs and reporting them to the district's School Health Advisory Committee.

She said each school has a dedicated team of administrators, physical education

teachers, mental health experts, nurses and other school staff, who recommend strategies to improve students' overall physical and mental health.

"We look at the overall picture of our kids," Norton said. "Outside of academics, what are other areas that have a need?"

Norton said the district's most visible student health initiative is the "Morning Mile," a before-school program where students walk or run before classes begin. North Side Elementary also recently installed a dedicated walking trail to encourage more movement in nature.

Norton said district schools also offer competitive before-school sports including basketball, soccer and games like "nine square in the air." The competitions also give students a chance to connect with educators and peers, which helps support student mental health and students' overall sense of belonging in addition to promoting activity.

"Kids are begging their parents to come to school early to participate," Norton said. "It's amazing."

Norton said the school

district has developed programming in recent years geared toward supporting students with adverse childhood experiences and other mental health needs, rather than taking a punitive approach to low performance and behavioral issues.

"Healthy students learn better. That's one of the big pictures that we look at," she said.

## Washington County Schools

Washington County Schools leaders have also developed programming with a similar ethos in mind, according to school Health Director Kelly Wagner. She said the school district encourages integrating physical activity into instruction whenever possible, with elementary teachers using "brain breaks," movement-based learning and digital learning platforms like GoNoodle to keep students active during academic time among other approaches.

"Physical activity enhances brain function, supports emotional regulation and helps students develop confidence and resilience," Wagner said. "When students are active, they are better prepared to engage,

focus and succeed in the classroom."

In addition, she said, the district supports teachers through mini-grants that fund flexible seating and classroom equipment to help facilitate physical activity. Schools also use morning announcements to share fitness tips and activity challenges, with some installing "active pathways" both indoors and outdoors to further encourage movement.

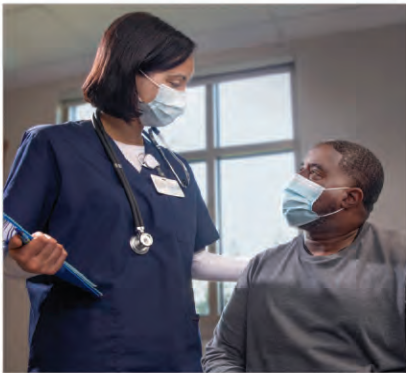
One of the district's newest initiatives is an "Activity Bus" stocked with games and physical activity equipment for on-site school activities and family engagement events.

"Not all students have access to structured physical activity outside of school, so ensuring opportunities during the school day helps close that gap," Wagner said. "Whether it is through PE, active classrooms or school-wide wellness events, these programs create consistency and promote lifelong habits that contribute to healthier communities.

"Promoting fitness is not just about checking a box," she added. "It is about helping children build healthy habits that last a lifetime."



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# Disabled served in Northeast Tennessee, Southwest Virginia

By RICK WAGNER  
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**K**INGSFORT— Thanks to a program serving disabled and/or elderly adults, a Kingsport double amputee can ride in and out of her house on a wheelchair ramp installed last summer.

And she can do so without fear of falling off the older, smaller ramp she had, something she said occurred in the past.

“I had a little bitty porch out there. A certain way I turned my wheelchair, I would fall off,” Melinda Thacker of Kingsport said in a recent interview. “Before, mine (her ramp) was not up to code. It was just a square porch.”

Thacker said she’s lived there since around 1995 and also receives meals delivered to her home from the same agency serving handicapped and/or elderly.

“I love them to death. They’ve helped me a lot,” Thacker said. “Most of my family’s dead.” Thacker added that a sister lives in Texas but doesn’t get to visit much, and her son helps her as much as he can but works a lot.

“I was just shocked when they did it. I was tickled to death,” Thacker said.

She is among disabled residents across Northeast Tennessee and far Southwest Virginia getting meals, home improve-

ments and other assistance they otherwise might not have because of their financial and health conditions. The agencies were founded in the 1970s as a result of amendments to 1965 federal law.

These are only part of the services provided to the elderly and disabled in the greater Tri-Cities. Other services include pet services, like cleaning cages and litter boxes and providing robotic pets for comfort. The latter give people the experience of owning a pet without feedings.

Thacker received her wheelchair ramp and gets meals from agencies serving the eight counties of Northeast Tennessee.

## NORTHEAST BY THE NUMBERS

Kathleen McLaughlin, outreach coordinator for the First Tennessee Area Agency on Aging and Disability, does SNAP (food stamp) outreach. She also works in public relations and is a grant writer for the FTAAAD.

The agency serves Northeast Tennessee with about 20 programs, which are not strictly for the disabled or elderly.

“All our programs are available to both populations,” McLaughlin said.

Statistics from FTAAAD for fiscal year 2024-25 indicate more than 300,000 meals provided in



CONTRIBUTED BY FIRST TENNESSEE AREA AGENCY ON AGING AND DISABILITY VIA KATHLEEN MCLAUGHLIN

**Melinda Thacker’s Kingsport house entrance after a new wheelchair ramp was installed by a local agency serving the elderly and disabled about a year ago. The organization is the First Tennessee Area Agency on Aging and Disability.**

Northeast Tennessee, 8,000 in-home services, more than 4,000 people who received Medicare assistance, about 700 vulnerable adults assisted and transportation provided to about 1,000 individuals.

Another program, funded by TennCare, is called Homecare Tennessee. It funds services like Thacker’s wheelchair ramp.

“She was basically trapped in her house unless someone carried her,” McLaughlin said.

“We got additional state funds to work on people’s

homes that couldn’t be done any other way,” McLaughlin said, referring to everything from lawn care to bathroom floors. The same program also provides “bed shakers” to awaken hearing-impaired people when a fire alarm sounds.

Additionally, the agency provides transportation using pass-through funds for area senior centers in the greater Tri-Cities. In some cases, volunteers provide the service and help people out of and into their

See **DISABILITY**, Page M35

## DISABILITY:

From Page M33

homes, as well as help carry groceries. McLaughlin said one man simply wants to get out to a Hardee's every few weeks.

A recent addition to FTAAAD's offering is funded by a grant offering access to the Trualta online caregiver portal. It offers training, informational and social elements that can assist family caregivers and reduce stress, including brief videos on caretaking techniques, a library of informational literature and online support groups.

### IN THE COMMONWEALTH

Over in far Southwest Virginia, Paula Culbertson of the Mountain Empire Older Citizens (MEOC) said that group likewise provides services for the elderly and disabled in the counties of Scott, Lee and Wise and the independent city of Norton.

She is director of communications for the MEOC, which provides homebound meals to those 60 and older or with a disability or condition that qualifies them.

"Our primary mission is to give people the support they need so they can age safely in their own homes for as long as they can," Culbertson said.

Kristen Rutherford, who oversees nutrition for the agency, said meals are provided two ways. One is for a group of homebound residents, who get two boxes a month of frozen dinners,

which comes to 10 meals a box.

"On average, we sent about 400 in-home delivered meals" a month, Rutherford said.

The other program takes meals to congregate sites or Connection Senior Centers. Michael Elliott, who oversees MEOC transportation, said the agency provides between 150,000 to 175,000 trips a year. He said about two-thirds of those serviced were older or people with disabilities.

For the past four years, the program has charged no fees, although Medicaid covers some of the non-general public trips.

### MORE NEEDS THAN RESOURCES?

McLaughlin said that despite the FTAAAD's programs, demand sometimes outstrips supply, specifically in providing meals to Northeast Tennessee.

"Just from the home meals, we have a wait list of more than 1,000 people," she said. A separate program provides a Meals on Wheels-type service in Kingsport, but in other areas she said FTAAAD works with the First Tennessee Human Resource Agency to prepare meals for senior centers and delivery.

In contrast, Rutherford said MEOC has no waiting list for either of its meal services "at the moment" but that it is on the "higher end" near the maximum number of meals it could provide.

# Keeping seasonal depression at bay

By JOY MAZUR

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Fall brings crisp breezes, gorgeous autumnal landscapes and pumpkin patches — but it can also bring the blues.

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD), often known as the "winter blues," affects many when the days get darker. According to the Cleveland Clinic, about 5% of adults in the U.S. experience the condition.

"It's harder to know what causes this biochemically," said Dr. Ashley Sundin, a second-year resident at ETSU Health Internal Medicine clinic.

Experts think lack of sunlight may cause the condition for those who are already prone. Doctors and researchers theorize that this could cause a brain chemical imbalance, Vitamin D deficiency or a melatonin boost in some people.

### HOW TO KNOW IF YOU'RE EXPERIENCING SAD

Outside of sadness or depression, other symptoms of SAD include carbohydrate cravings, fatigue, heavy limbs and trouble concentrating.

"Maybe more moody, sleeping more, weight gain," Sundin added. "Just basically not enjoying the same activities that they did before."

The condition is usually more common between the ages of 18 and 30. Women are also at higher risk, as well as people who already have mood disorders or live in dark or cloudy regions.

### TREATMENTS FOR SEASONAL DEPRESSION

Several methods can help treat seasonal depression. Sundin said light therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy and antidepressants can all be beneficial.

Light therapy in particular can simulate natural light. Special lamps with white fluorescent tubes are brighter than many indoor lights, and are particularly effective when used for 15 to 30 minutes every morning.

She added that if individuals feel like they're sleeping more, not getting the same enjoyment out of life or are generally feeling down, they should talk to their doctor.

"It's more than just the winter blues," Sundin said. "People sleep more, they feel down and just are really struggling."



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# County health departments help people make healthy choices

By JOHN THOMPSON

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**E**LIZABETHTON— One of the most important assets in the continuing efforts to improve the overall health of the community is the county health departments of Northeast Tennessee. Over the years, all sorts of programs, from immunizations against pandemics to cessation of smoking, have helped improve the health of the local population.

Caroline Chinouth serves as the county director of both the Carter County and Johnson County Health Departments. She knows the health challenges of serving a population in a metropolitan area — and also the challenges of a very rural area in some of the most mountainous sections of the state.

Certainly the health problems being handled by the Carter County Health Department are different from the health problems faced in Johnson County, but they both have the same mission: to protect, promote and improve the health and well-being of all people in Tennessee. The department does this by providing various services aiming to prevent disease, control its spread and promote public health awareness. These services are available to individuals of all ages who meet eligibility requirements.

This means the health department helps young families with newborns just starting out. It also helps the



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**Shana Johnson is the health educator at the Carter County Health Department. She shows these disgusting jars to young people to show what impact the later stages of smoking have on the body.**

grandparents of those families as they struggle with the problems of aging. And it helps those in between with everything from recreation and wellness to healthy relationships. The health department even helps the family pets with its work on preventing rabies.

On top of everything else, the health department is the first line of defense in new environmental challenges.

“What don’t we do?” Chinouth said.

Chinouth added that the

Tennessee Department of Health has recruited a valuable ally in the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation for its Healthy Parks Healthy Person (HPPH) program. This is a statewide incentive program encouraging Tennesseans to take their health into their own hands and get outside into the incredible park system the state offers. HPPH app users can earn points by participating in healthy activities in any park and redeem their points for free rewards. The app can be downloaded for free in the App or Google Play store.

Of course, there are conditions like arthritis which prevent people from taking full advantage of the outdoor programs. Chinouth said there are programs being offered for those people, including gentle yoga, chair yoga and arthritis stretching.

Prevention has long been a tool in the arsenal in the county health department’s efforts to promote better health.

One of its most reliable tools has been vaccination

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Showing off some of the educational posters the Carter County Health Department has to encourage healthy choices are (from left to right): Washington County Health Director Katie McClellan; Carter County Health Department Assessment and Planning Coordinator and Public Information Officer Morgan Scott; Carter County Health Director Caroline Chinouth; and Carter County Health Educator Shana Johnson.

# HEALTH:

From Page M36

programs. The history of public health departments cannot be told without the stories of its role in the COVID-19 vaccinations, or its polio vaccination programs of the mid-20th century.

Education has also been a long-term ally in the Health Department's efforts to improve health. Chinouth said the smoking cessation program continues to use Centers for Disease Control and Prevention evidence-based

strategies to reduce tobacco use and tobacco-related disease.

Shana Johnson, health educator for the Carter County Health Department, said that demonstrating the effects of smoking on lungs continues to be effective. Just a few looks at her models of lungs destroyed by smoking provide a lifetime image of what happens to a smoker's lungs.

Chinouth said another effective program is the screening programs that can be done out in public. Not all screening can be done on the

spot, since many programs require time and laboratory testing, but some are very impactful. One example is the Million Hearts Campaign, which monitors heart health and blood pressure monitoring.

The health department also provides primary care and family planning. These services include diagnostics and management of acute and chronic illnesses, wellness screenings, immunizations, education, counseling, pelvic and breast exams, pregnancy tests and contraceptive supplies. Assistance with medica-

tions and supplies for treating common conditions may be available to those who qualify.

Another program is CHANT. This stands for Community Health Access and Navigation in Tennessee. It is an integrated model of care coordination. The program provides enhanced patient-centered engagement, assistance with navigating complex systems and care coordination of medical services. It also assists with co-pays, deductibles and co-insurance for children and youth with physical disabilities.

# Out and about: High school games to watch through September

By J.D. VAUGHN  
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If you're looking to supplement your outdoor recreation with some Friday night lights, look no further — here's where you can get your high school football fix for the season.

Science Hill welcomed Elizabethton to Kermit Tipton Stadium on opening night Aug. 22, marking a century-old rivalry with the 101st meeting between the two teams.

But home field advantage has been nonexistent in recent years, the visiting team having won four straight games in the series.

Most recently, Science Hill won the 100th gathering last year in Elizabethton 35-14. The Cyclones, however, have taken five of the last seven meetings since 2018.

West Ridge, which has started 1-0 every year since opening its doors in 2021, welcomes its toughest opening night opponent in the program's young history. Sullivan County rival Tennessee High visits the Evelyn Rafalowski Athletic Complex, both teams with plenty of question marks entering 2025.

Here are some other games to keep an eye on

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TODD BRASE

Dobyns-Bennett's Tegan Begley (7) breaks free for a fourth-quarter touchdown against West Ridge at J. Fred Johnson Stadium.



TODD BRASE

Dobyns-Bennett's Tyree Thomas (26) and Devin Murdock (35) get to West Ridge quarterback Trey Frazier (3) for a sack.



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# HIGH SCHOOL:

From Page M38 through September.

## SEPT. 5

Conference play commences for most teams in Week 3, and the pigskin will likely log a lot of air miles in Rogersville on that Friday, Sept. 5, as Cherokee welcomes Region 1-4A foe Sullivan East.

Also in Hawkins County, Volunteer welcomes Grainger for the Falcons' first conference game under new coach Jeremy Wagner.

Meanwhile, in Erwin, defending Region 1-3A champion Unicoi County hosts the only team to defeat the Blue Devils last fall — state quarterfinalist Gatlinburg-Pittman.

## SEPT. 12

Speaking of teams affected by Hurricane Helene, Happy Valley entertains Hampton the following week. It'll be the Warriors' second game on their new turf surface, after their Week 2 tilt with Cloudland.

David Crockett will have opportunity to boost its 5A playoff positioning against Morristown West that night in Jonesborough as well.

## SEPT. 26

Dobyns-Bennett at West Ridge — most everyone in Sullivan County has this one circled. No Sullivan County School has beaten D-B since 1993, and the Wolves can establish themselves in Region 1-6A should they end that drought. It'll be the second conference game for D-B after hosting Morristown East the previous week, but the Big East opener for West Ridge.



TODD BRASE

Dobyns-Bennett's Peyton Franklin (22) takes it in for a touchdown against West Ridge.



TODD BRASE

Dobyns-Bennett's Tegan Begley (7) tries to break free during a win over West Ridge at J. Fred Johnson Stadium.

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