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BELLEVILLE NEWS-DEMOCRAT

Hospitals adopting stricter visitor rules amid high flu levels

BY MEREDITH HOWARD

mhoward@bnd.com

An increase in respiratory infections, especially influenza, has led to rising hospitalization rates and stricter visitor guidelines at some metro-east hospitals.

Illinois is seeing high flu activity and moderate respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV, and COVID, according to the state department of public health.

The state's flu activity was considered "very high" the week of Jan. 8, and one pediatric flu death has been reported this season in Illinois.

Statewide, COVID cases made up 2.04% of hospital admissions for the week ending Jan. 3, while 5.95% were due to flu and RSV caused 0.67%, according to the Illinois Department of Public Health. Hospital admissions for all three respiratory viruses are increasing.

St. Elizabeth's Hospital in

O'Fallon, part of HSHS, is seeing more patients with flu-like symptoms, RSV and rhinovirus than earlier in 2025, Chris Klay, CEO of HSHS' Southern Illinois market, said Wednesday.

"We have seen consistently high clinical volumes, really in all of our emergency departments, and then that does correlate to a higher-than-normal inpatient census," Klay said.

HSHS' Southern Illinois hospitals, including St. Elizabeth's, St. Joseph's in Breese, St. Joseph's

in Highland and Holy Family Hospital in Greenville, are operating at capacity but managing, Klay said.

HSHS Illinois hospitals have implemented stricter guidelines for visitors during the surge in respiratory virus admissions, including a two-person visitor limit for each patient at any given time, as well as an 18-year age minimum for visitors.

Those with a cold or flu-like symptoms including fever, chills, sore throat, body or mus-

cle aches, headache, cough or runny nose should not visit patients, the guidelines say, and visitors should wash their hands or use hand sanitizer when entering and leaving patient rooms.

Memorial hospitals in Belleville and in Shiloh are also seeing an increase in flu cases, Memorial Hospital Chief Medical Officer Dr. Kevin Journagan confirmed Wednesday. Norovirus cases have also increased at the two locations.

"Our units are getting full, but we have not reached a crisis point," Journagan said. "At this point, we're still able to meet the needs of the patients that are coming into the [emergency department] and needing to be

SEE VISITOR RULES, 3A



O'Fallon hospital leasing former restaurant to prep meals

BY MEREDITH HOWARD

mhoward@bnd.com

There's been a sudden surge of activity inside and out of the shuttered Cheddar's Scratch Kitchen restaurant in Fairview Heights.

As of just over a week ago, HSHS St. Elizabeth's Hospital in O'Fallon temporarily leased the former restaurant to prepare patients' meals.

Although influenza hospitalizations are high locally and statewide, the move is due to construction rather than any urgent patient overflow situation. St. Elizabeth's Hospital is in the midst of multiple major construction projects totaling \$116 million, and an already in-progress inpatient bed expansion has displaced the hospital's kitchen.

"We have leased that building, and have fully updated the kitchen in that building," Chris Klay, CEO of HSHS' Southern Illinois market, said Wednesday. "So it's obviously a licensed commercial kitchen that's been certified and approved through the appropriate agencies to deem compliance, and so we are now utilizing that space as the temporary kitchen for St. Elizabeth's Hospital."

Patients' food is being prepared at the former Cheddar's location and transported to the hospital, where it's then further prepared, plated and served, Klay added.

"We have had no disruptions in deployment of food to our

SEE MEALS, 4A

Mentally ill man who was 'terrorizing' neighborhood died in jail

BY MIKE KOZIAK

mkoziatek@bnd.com

BELLEVILLE

Kevin O. Peals Sr. was scheduled to appear in court for a review of his mental health treatment plan before he faced a slew of allegations, including threatening to "shoot and kill" two Belleville firefighters.

Neighbors on South 31st Street reported that Peals filled his front yard with trash taken from a nearby apartment building's dumpster. He allegedly set a pile of trash on fire near foliage between his property and

the apartments while naked from the waist down on June 14, according to city and county records.

City workers cleaned his property four times, and a fire broke out on the front porch in April.

"He's just been terrorizing the neighborhood," Police Chief Matt Eiskant told the Belleville News-Democrat in June.

The 65-year-old man was missing the morning of his Dec. 19 court date.

It turns out Peals had died of natural causes more than two months earlier, on Oct. 11,

inside the St. Clair County Jail, according to Illinois State Police and the county coroner.

Three days before Peals' death, a county judge ordered him to undergo treatment for mental illness because a forensic psychologist found him unfit to stand trial.

St. Clair County Public Defender Cathy MacElroy was scheduled to represent Peals on Dec. 19 and was surprised when he did not appear.

"I had no idea that he had died," MacElroy said.

MacElroy said she expects changes in the notification process when someone dies in

the county jail. "My understanding is that going forward, the jail will notify me if anybody dies," she said.

MacElroy said she reiterated to jail officials that defense lawyers should be notified when an inmate dies and believes they are in agreement with her.

A representative of the county jail could not be reached for comment about Peals' death.

MacElroy said she had checked a roster of names of people in the jail and there was a "Kevin Peals" on the list.

SEE PEALS SR., 3A

Millstadt's sewer service develop plan after devastating fire

BY MIKE KOZIAK

mkoziatek@bnd.com

Millstadt village officials are working with the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency to develop a plan to manage

wastewater after a fire at the village's sewer plant, Mayor Michael Todd said Wednesday.

The fire on Tuesday damaged the equipment used to control the wastewater treatment plant off East Laurel Street, Todd said. No injuries

were reported.

The Illinois State Fire Marshal was called to investigate the cause of the fire.

Todd said the village is in discussions with the state environmental agency to "see what needs to be done."

Millstadt has asked residents to "limit" the amount of water they use.

"Due to the fire at the Village Sewer Plant, the Village is requesting that residents limit the amount of water discharge they are producing during this time," states a message posted on Millstadt's website Wednesday morning.

The water is safe to drink, according to the announcement.

"However, the Plant's sew-

age processing capabilities have been reduced. Please limit discharge through showers, washing machines, dishwashers, etc."

Todd did not have information about the size of the reduction in capacity at the plant.

Also, the village does not yet have an estimate of the cost of the repairs needed at the plant or when the repairs would be completed, Todd said.



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