

The Facts

COVERING BRAZORIA COUNTY ★ WHERE TEXAS BEGAN

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Hospitals, insurance giants remain at odds

By NICK IRENE
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LAKE JACKSON — Many Blue Cross Blue Shield of Texas carriers enter the new year with one less hospital in their network as negotiations with CHI St. Luke's Health remain at a stalemate. Aetna policyholders soon will have the same problem at UTMB Health. CHI St. Luke's Health Chief

CAREQUESTION

The impasse between CHI St. Luke's Health and Blue Cross Blue Shield applies only to hospital services, a hospital system spokeswoman said, not individual physicians in an outpatient setting. Hospital services also remain available but will be billed at the higher, out-of-network rates, she said.

Executive Officer Doug Lawson was hopeful an agreement would be reached before the Dec. 15 deadline, but back-and-forth negotiations have stalled over

disagreements about reimbursement rates. "We had made a number of important concessions over the past 30 to 60 days," Lawson said.

"Unfortunately, Blue Cross Blue Shield has refused to meet us in the middle and continue to offer rates that are well below the market and do not allow us to administer or invest in the latest technology or infrastructures the community needs."

Lawson ensured the community the facility's emergency rooms are still open for everyone

■ See **HOSPITALS**, Page 7A

Positive test rate spiking

One-third of tests Saturday showed infection, nonprofit says

By ALEXA CRENSHAW
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ANGLETON — A Lake Jackson man and two Alvin men were added Monday to Brazoria County's death toll from COVID-19 as the positivity rate for tests remains high, officials said.

More than a quarter of the people being tested by the Community Health Network are found to have an active COVID infection, chief admin officer Penny Pabst said.

"From last week's data, from Dec. 26 through Dec. 30, it was 28.9 percent people testing positive for the virus," Pabst said. "That's 68 positives out of 235 people."

On Saturday alone, out of 93 people tested, 32 results came back positive, Pabst said.

"That's data from all of our clinics in Brazoria County that were open on Saturday, including Freeport, Pearland and Alvin. This does not include Angleton," Pabst said. "That's 34.8 percent positive on just one day."

With the 206 new cases reported Monday by the Brazoria County Health Department, the county is averaging 277 cases a day in the first three days of the new year. The county did not report cases on New Year's Day.

The three fatalities reported Monday are of an Alvin man in his 70s, and two men in their 60s, one each from Lake Jackson and Alvin, county spokeswoman Sharon Trower said in her daily report. County data shows 212 deaths related to COVID-19.

None of Monday's cases are from tests administered more than two weeks ago, Trower's report said.

Community Health Network is not yet providing same-day testing, though it does often receive results in 24 hours, Pabst said.

"We did get back all of

■ See **CASES**, Page 3A

Facts vs. Fiction

During the coronavirus crisis, Facts staff members will work to combat the rumors and expose people trying to take advantage of residents. Submit your questions to news@thefacts.com

Flu cases low, but bug still around

By NICK IRENE
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Residents are still testing positive for the flu and are counted separately from those who contracted COVID-19, CHI St. Luke's Health Brazosport Chief Medical Officer Roland Prezas said.

While COVID-19 is spreading at its peak, Texas residents have undergone a mild flu season with only 0.88 percent testing positive of 22,525 tests between Sept. 27 and Dec. 26, according to state data.

Influenza testing at Texas Public Health Laboratories has significantly decreased to increase availability for COVID-19 testing, according to the Texas Influenza Surveillance Report released Dec. 30.

Prezas also credits the increased focus on social distancing, good hygiene and mask-wearing as factors in limiting the spread of the flu.

"There is definitely flu out there at this time," Prezas said. "We are seeing

■ See **FACTS**, Page 7A



ADDISON HOWELL/The Facts

Maria Morales, Sweeny ISD custodial staff member, cleans the acrylic dividers that separate desks Monday at Sweeny Elementary. Morales and other custodial staff constantly sanitize surfaces during the school day.

A CLEAN BREAK

School districts doing all they can to prevent repeat of post-Thanksgiving spike

By CORINNA RICHARDSON
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Between confirmed cases and close contacts among students and staff, Sweeny ISD witnessed a spike in COVID-19 cases after Thanksgiving. The surge prompted the district to successively close each campus for a week during the three weeks before the Christmas break.

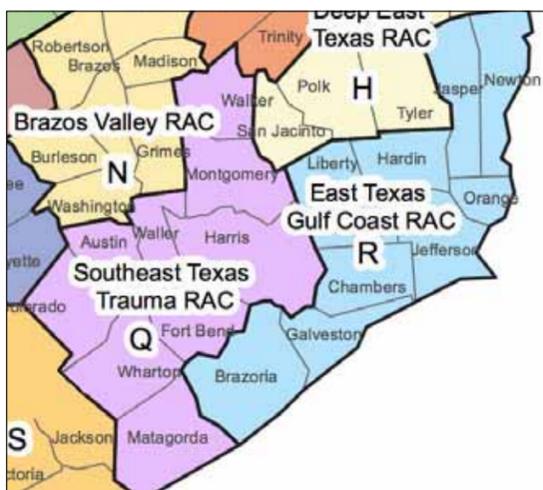
"First week back from Thanksgiving, we had the high school shut down. The second week back we had the junior high shut down, and the final week was the elementary," Hill said. "We're hopeful that we won't



ADDISON HOWELL/The Facts

Sweeny kindergarten teacher Meghan Ashley explains how COVID-19 has affected her teaching curriculum Monday. Kindergarten is where kids learn to share and they can't do that this year, she said.

■ See **CLEAN**, Page 7A



Texas Department of State Health Services

The leaders of Brazoria and Galveston counties are asking the state to move them into Trauma Service Area Q, to which it has more in common than their current Area R.

County wants to swap trauma service areas

Change will better connect Brazoria County to entities its residents already use

By WES WOLFE
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ANGLETON — In a vacuum, many of the arguments as to which trauma service area Brazoria County should belong are likely not that far removed from legislative redistricting debates. But this isn't occurring in a vacuum, and there are tangible benefits to a move during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Brazoria County Judge Matt Sebesta and Galveston County Judge Mark Henry sent a letter Dec. 30, on Henry's

letterhead, to Jorie Klein, the director of trauma systems for the state Department of State Health Services. They asked for both counties to be moved from Trauma Service Area R to Trauma Service Area Q.

"I spoke with Judge Henry and we felt that it was a better reflection of our hospitalizations in our area to be included in the different trauma area than the one that it is, which includes Jefferson County and those areas in East Texas," Sebesta said. "It's a better reflection of the actual makeup of Brazoria and Galveston counties."

Brazoria sits as the southernmost and westernmost county in the Trauma Service Area R. The other counties include Chambers, Galveston, Hardin, Jasper, Jefferson,

Liberty, Newton and Orange, comprising an area hugging the coast and going up to the Louisiana state line,

Trauma Service Area Q, meanwhile, not only contains Harris County, but other counties bordering Brazoria, including Fort Bend, Matagorda and Wharton. Other counties in Area Q include Austin, Colorado, Montgomery, Walker and Waller.

In their letter, the judges contend Brazoria and Galveston aren't as closely connected to the other counties in Area R either by geography or through the medical economy, with patients and medical professionals moving between Brazoria, Galveston

■ See **AREAS**, Page 7A

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