A Salute to Front-Line Workers

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On the front line:

Essential workers persist through fears to keep things running



By Margaret Austin Wyoming Tribune Eagle

CHEYENNE – In early March, when the first case of the new coronavirus was confirmed in Wyoming, life in the Cowboy State changed almost in an instant.

Gov. Mark Gordon supported a string of closures proposed by State Health Officer Dr. Alexia Harrist, shutting down theaters, bars, restaurants and gyms to help slow the spread of COVID-19.

And while many residents shifted to working from home and keeping a safe social distance, a number of front-line workers put their own health and safety on the line to uphold critical infrastructure in Laramie County.

Doctors, bus drivers, first responders, grocery store employees and janitorial staff went to work as health officials recommended that everyone stay home. They delivered food for students who were out of school; they stocked store shelves with toilet paper and cleaning supplies; they responded to emergency calls, and they

kept workplaces clean for other essential workers.

While many have praised these employees as the heroes of the pandemic, the front-line workers themselves were humble about the roles they played. Many saw the value in their work before the pandemic struck – they simply rose to the occasion to meet the community's needs.

The Wyoming Tribune Eagle reached out to a number of essential, front-line workers in Laramie County who have provided light and hope during such a dark time, and these are some of their stories.

Medical professionals

As the novel respiratory virus spread across the world, researchers scrambled to learn more about COVID-19: How is it transmitted? How should it be treated? How can we best protect our health care workers treating COVID-19 patients?

But when facing a virus that would go on to kill more than 100,000 Americans by July, the medical professionals didn't have time to wait for

answers to those questions. At Cheyenne Regional Medical Center, the doctors, nurses and medical technicians showed up day after day, ready to give patients the care they needed, whether they had symptoms of a heart attack or the coronavirus.

While CRMC staff members did worry about their own health, especially at the start of the pandemic, that never deterred them from providing the best quality of care, according to Jessica Hughes, the medical director of the CRMC Emergency Department.

"People come to us when they're in their greatest need," Hughes said. "We like to be able to help them, serve them and pick them up when they need us the most. That's why we do what we do."

The desire to help was paired with the need for a change in operations at CRMC to meet recommended COVID-19 precautions. Other hospitals in the U.S. saw coronavirus outbreaks among their own workers, like when 26 health care workers in the same unit tested positive

At a glance

While our nation's front-line workers have been hailed as heroes for working through the coronavirus pandemic, many of them are humble in their role supporting critical infrastructure

This special section honors those in Laramie County who have put their own health on the line to keep things running.

for COVID-19 at St. Rose Hospital near San Francisco.

Extensive measures were taken at CRMC to keep staff safe, including changing the personal protective equipment requirements and creating isolation rooms for patients with COVID-19 symptoms. CRMC's team of infection preventionists, including Katelyn Lovelis and Erica Hanson, also were working "all hands on deck" to ensure that CRMC staff knew the transmission risks

See FRONT LINE, 6

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From Eric and I – we want to say THANK YOU to all of our frontline workers. It's important to remember while you are serving others in our community, you must also take care of yourself. Take time to exercise. Listen to music. Talk to friends and family. If you do feel overwhelmed, give yourself permission to reach out

to a community mental health center, counselor or physician.

Our mental health is just as important as our physical health. Now more than ever, access to affordable, quality mental health is critical for every Wyoming community. You can count on me to do my part to move us forward toward prosperity and I'll fight to keep mental health and substance abuse services accessible to all Wyoming citizens. I'd be honored with your vote and again, thank you.

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FRONT LINE from 3

and proper safety precautions.

"Because it was so unknown, we were helping them process and deal with everything so they could feel comfortable and safe at work," Hanson said.

As CRMC's health care professionals continue to work the front lines at the hospital, the weight of fighting a global pandemic doesn't disappear when they go home. On top of the precautions in place at CRMC, staff members practice vigilant hand washing, mask wearing and social distancing in their personal lives to mitigate their risks of both catching and spreading the virus if they were to have an asymptomatic case.

Those actions help protect the general public, but they help protect the medical professionals' loved ones, as well.

"In the (Emergency Department), we completely decontaminate and change scrubs; the first thing we do when we get home is shower, to make sure we're not taking it home to our families or our kids," Hughes said.

Cleaning services

While coronavirus is mainly spread through droplets in the air from someone carrying the virus, the National Institutes of Health found that the virus can remain stable for hours on various surfaces, and even days on plastic and stainless steel.

Health officials all over the world have been repeating

the same advice for months – wash your hands regularly; don't touch your face; keep a safe, 6-foot social distance; and



Linda Williams, owner, The Meaning of Cleaning.

regularly clean high-touch areas.

Keeping living and work spaces clean is more important now than ever, which has translated to an increased demand for cleaning services. The Meaning of Cleaning – a two-person company focused mainly on residential services – has gotten a couple new clients since the pandemic reached Wyoming.

Like with the other frontline workers, those who provide cleaning services put themselves at a personal risk. Linda Williams, the owner of the Meaning of Cleaning, had to shut down her operation for two weeks after being exposed to the virus. Williams implemented almost every safety precaution you could think of with her clients in mind, but with COVID-19, it's better to be safe than sorry when it comes to self-isolation after a potential exposure.

During that time, Williams said, "Almost all of my clients continued to pay, whether I came and cleaned or not."

Her clients supported her during that rough patch, but

Williams
certainly
returned
the favor
throughout
the
shutdown.
Many of
her clients
are elderly
residents
who live
alone, so
Williams has

stepped up to help them with daily tasks and to check in on them while their families are away.

Those over the age of 60 are considered high risk for complications caused by COVID-19, and according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention eight out of 10 coronavirus-related deaths in the U.S. have been residents age 65 and older.

Williams said many of her clients' families normally help with regular care, but they've been reluctant to travel due to the health risks of COVID-19 and the fear of bringing the virus to their loved ones.

Instead, Williams has stepped up to help her clients with grocery shopping, driving to doctor's appointments and maintaining their yards. She even text messages some of her clients daily just to check in and talk. Nonprofits like Meals on Wheels, which provides meals to elderly residents, also started calling their

clients during the pandemic to help combat the loneliness faced by seniors who live on their own.

"I've become a lot like their extended family," Williams said. "When I go out, I do their chores; I do a lot of things for them that their family would normally come and do."

LCSD1 Nutrition Services

For some students, school provides more than just a place to learn. In the fall of 2019, 37.7% of Laramie County School District 1 students qualified for free and reduced-price lunch, according to LCSD1 data.

So within a day of the announcement that schools would close due to COVID-19 health concerns, LCSD1's Nutrition Services team came together to figure out how to keep feeding the kids while they were remote learning.

With the help of the district's transportation department, LCSD1 set up a youth feeding program, where anyone under the age of 18 could pick up a breakfast and lunch bag from a variety of locations, including See FRONT LINE, 8



Kylee Willer, Emergency Department nurse, Cheyenne Regional Medical Center.

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Doreen Wright

Thank you, front line workers.

Your dedication to Laramie County is what makes our community a great place to live. Your commitment to service does not go unnoticed. I salute you.



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A SALUTE TO FRONT-LINERS

FRONT LINE from 6

most schools and some parks, each weekday.

The program's operations have improved greatly since its inception, according to Johnson Production Manager Ray Geerdes. The Nutrition Services and transportation staff really got into the swing of things once they started using multiple locations for preparation and storage.

Geerdes said she misses giving the kids options and serving them hot food, "but the point is the kids are getting fed."

The combination of the coronavirus' effects have posed major issues for some Laramie County families.

When schools closed in March to help curb the spread of the virus, most day-care centers also closed due to the state health order. Not only did parents have to figure out virtual learning, becoming homeschooling pros in a matter of weeks, those who weren't teleworking also had to find someone to stay home with the kids.

A number of parents lost

their jobs altogether as a result of the unprecedented slowdown in the economy. By the end of March, initial unemployment claims in Laramie County had skyrocketed more than 1,000%.

"With the money situation for some families right now, they have other things to worry about," Geerdes said. "This way, they don't have to worry about food for their kids."

Currently, the Nutrition Services and transportation staff are gearing up to prepare meals for LCSD1's Jump Start program, and they'll continue to provide free food bags at a number of locations through the middle of August.

"The number one goal is to feed the kids, so if we get that done, I think we succeeded at the end of the day," Geerdes said.

First responders

While many people shifted to telework during the first peak of COVID-19 cases in the U.S., the country's first responders still had jobs to do.

With restaurants closed and people cooking more at home, firefighting was still a muchneeded community service.

However, the health recommendations for COVID-19 contradict what firefighters do on a daily basis. While health officers recommend that people keep their social groups small, with family or close friends, first responders have to respond to calls from people they've never met. And when providing someone with medical assistance, it's impossible to keep a safe social distance.

Because of the health risks, Cheyenne Fire Rescue and the rural fire districts in Laramie County have taken additional precautions to protect their employees.

Cole Mondragon, a captain with Laramie County Fire District 1, said, "Because of a potential COVID-19 call that we go on, we have to don our protective gear before we even get on the apparatus. ... If we make patient contact, we have to come back and decontaminate all of our apparatus or equipment that

was used for that particular call."

Mondragon said risks are just a part of the job when you're a firefighter, whether you're responding to a fire or car accident, so the main focus during the pandemic remained on protecting staff, as usual.

Taking full precautions and following the health department's recommendations, Mondragon had to quarantine himself due to a potential exposure. While he turned out to be healthy and is back at work, "it was a little nerveracking" at the beginning, he said.

"We support each other a lot here at the firehouse," Mondragon said. "We take care of each other, and that keeps us going."

Margaret Austin is the Wyoming Tribune Eagle's local government reporter. She can be reached at maustin@ wyomingnews.com or 307-633-3152. Follow her on Twitter at @MargaretMAustin.

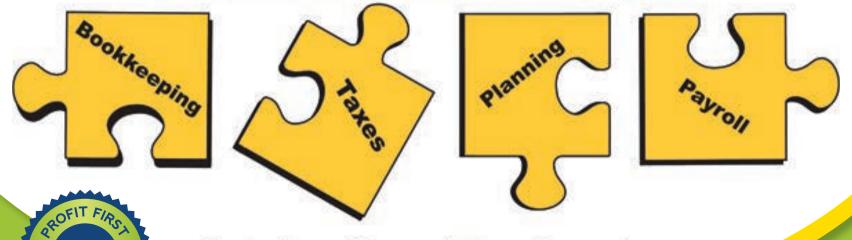


Melissa Sommers, cashier, Johnson Junior High School, Laramie County School District 1.



From left, Bre Cisneros, Saul Alvarado, and McKenna Russell, Emergency Department technicians, Cheyenne Regional Medical Center.

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Thank you

to all the Front Line Workers in our Community. We appreciate all you did & continue to do during these unprecedented times.

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From left, Kaitlin Whitman, Jordan Van Bol, Britney Wallesch, Gideon, Emile Intlekofer, Maddi Haak and Lincoln, Black Dog Animal Rescue.





Beth Pafford, left, and Katrina Banks, cooks and servers, Johnson Junior High School, Laramie County School District 1.



Capt. Cole Mondragon, Laramie County Fire District 1.



Nicole Ziemer, Emergency Department nurse, Cheyenne Regional Medical Center.



Dr. Jessica Hughes, physician and Emergency Department medical director, Cheyenne Regional Medical Center.



Naomi Cooper, Emergency Department nurse, Cheyenne Regional Medical Center.



From left, Naomi Cooper, Kylee Willer, Janet Hill and Nicole Ziemer, Emergency Department nurses, Cheyenne Regional Medical Center.



Ella Kubicz, Laramie County Fire District 10 Courtesy photo



McKenna Russell, Emergency Department technician, Cheyenne Regional Medical Center.



Dan Hendrick, grief support coordinator and LOSS Team director, Grace For 2 Brothers.



Jordan Van Tol and Rat Daddy, Black Dog Animal Rescue.

◆ Erica Hanson, left, and Katelyn Lovelis, infection preventionists, Cheyenne Regional Medical

Center.



Vanessa Hayes, Youth Services assistant, Laramie County Library.



Eloy Martinez and Jessica Elliott, co-owners, The Crooked Cup.



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Janet Hill, Emergency Department nurse, Cheyenne Regional Medical Center.



Bre Cisneros, Emergency Department technician, Cheyenne Regional Medical Center.



Landin Smith, left, and Rachel Settles, Emergency Department nurse managers, Cheyenne Regional Medical Center.



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District 8





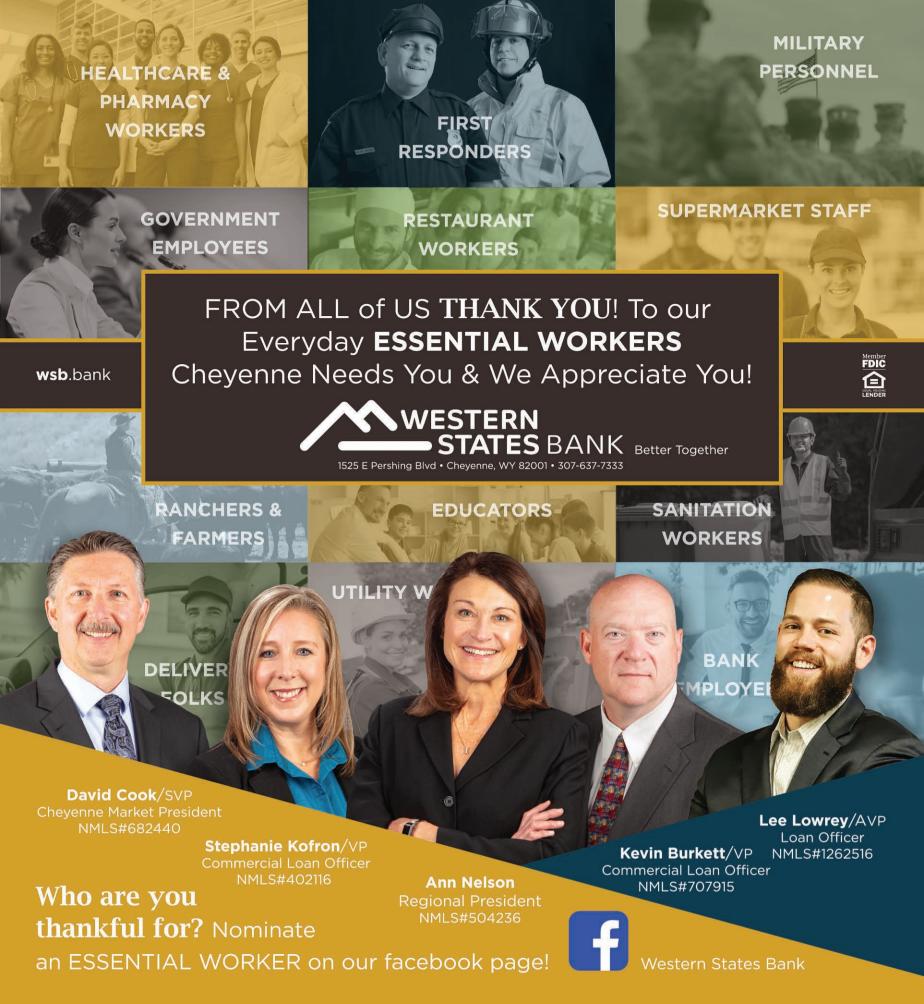


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