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'A low level of activity' even now for H1N1

The flu season is nearing an end, but state health officials are still reporting cases of the pandemic H1N1 strain causing hospitalizations and even deaths.

Last week, the 99th person in North Carolina died of complications from H1N1 flu, and 376 people were hospitalized.

"We are still seeing a low level of activity," said Dr. Megan Davies, state epidemiologist. She said the virus remains a particular threat to people at high risk of complications, including those with chronic diseases such as asthma and diabetes, children and pregnant women.

Since April, when the flu first struck in North Carolina, the virus crowded out other competing strains so that all influenza illnesses tested across the state turned out to be H1N1, Davies said.

Most deaths occurred among people in high risk groups, and younger than 65. That's unusual for influenza, which typically strikes older people with more severe illness.

But things could be worse. In neighboring Georgia, flu cases have spiked in recent weeks, and officials with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest the continuing infections could be the result of low vaccination rates in that state.

In North Carolina, 18 percent of the population, or 1.7 million people, got H1N1 flu shots or nasal inoculations, Davies said. The vaccination rate was higher than for a normal flu season.

"I'm confident we averted some very bad outcomes through vaccination," Davies said.

Still, thousands of doses of unused vaccine will be destroyed. Demand for the vaccine waned as the supply improved after initial rationing.

Davies said people could still benefit from flu shots, which are available free at county health departments.

"I think it's probably still worth getting vaccinated for a little while longer," she said. "We're still hearing reports of deaths, and this probably will go on for weeks."

Next year's seasonal flu shot will target the H1N1 strain, along with two others. Davies said people who were vaccinated against the virus this year, and those who got sick, have immunity to H1N1, but they will need a seasonal flu shot for protection against the other strains of influenza that are likely to circulate.

Across the nation, more than 12,000 people have died from infections attributed to H1N1, which spread across the globe last spring.
Diagnosis positive

Bill Roper is a tall, soft-voiced pediatrician, and it's easy to imagine him comforting some child about to get a shot or undergo an exam he doesn't want. Roper is not one, in other words, to get flummoxed by crying or other distractions. Those qualities make him also a good candidate to take a thoughtful look at the recent health care reforms passed by Congress after months and months of intense debate.

But his opinion takes on more gravitas since he also happens to be the CEO of UNC Health Care. The News & Observer's Sarah Avery recently took Roper's pulse on the issue, along with those of several of his colleagues.

The overall prognosis, at least in terms of what this sampling of UNC Health Care folks said, would be positive for President Barack Obama and the Democrats who passed the reform. (Roper did not choose those who were interviewed and other UNC Health supervisors had nothing to do with the selection, either.)

There were some qualifications in their support, and there were some hesitations as well, some of them related to perfectly legitimate concerns about the effect reform could have on health care costs, a conundrum that has yet to be fully solved. Without effective cost controls, the reform plan could collapse under its own weight.

Cost-curbing

Roper, a strong supporter of the president's reform efforts, describes the current system as "almost destined to be expensive," with financial incentives for multiple procedures, while maintaining patients' good health doesn't carry as much of a profit margin. He wants the government to do more to curb costs. But he says it's important to cover the uninsured, as reform will do. (Roper held high health care posts in two Republican presidential administrations, which perhaps gives his support for reform an even further measure of credibility.)

Roper's views as to how the uninsured will benefit are shared by Dr. Charles Cairns, head of the emergency department, who says his unit sees many people with problems that could be controlled with regular visits to a doctor. Instead, without insurance, they wind up getting very expensive care in emergency rooms.

Barbara Freiman, a nurse in the N.C. Children's Hospital, also supports reform because children without insurance sometimes die from asthma, for example, when routine care would save them. "That," she said, "should not happen."

Access to care

The verdict on reform is not unanimous. Nurse Lori Abate says ObamaCare, as it's sometimes called, doesn't cut costs and doesn't address the shortage of doctors, a problem that will worsen with millions more people coming into the insurance system.
A young employee who delivers linens said, "I don't think it's fair if I have to pay for it, but what are you going to do." He's not alone in resisting the idea of government-mandated insurance, although a mandate is necessary to spread risks as insurance companies are required to cover people whom they likely would have shunned. And a part-time transportation worker who's on Medicare thought the process of reform was "crooked."

Overall, though, it's easy to understand why those in the health care trenches would be open to changes that could make care more accessible to people in need of help, the people these caregivers see and serve every day.

The president has not proclaimed health care reform to be a finished crusade, and indeed, Roper thinks there is more to do, though he strongly endorses the strides that have been made. But at least America has taken a step toward ensuring that access to health care becomes more of a guarantee than a hope.
Donors abandon Seahawks after basketball team's steep decline

By Brian Mull
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Morale is low and the money is tighter than ever.

The UNC-Wilmington athletic department's flagship program is floundering, and some members of its fundraising arm have little faith in recovery under the current administration.

And the always tight financial picture within the UNCW athletic department appears even less rosy, with $540,000 owed to recently reassigned men’s basketball coach Benny Moss over the next three years.

The Seahawk Club has experienced a sharp decline in membership and contributions over the past four years, a fact tied in part to the demise of the men’s basketball team.

Chancellor Rosemary DePaolo and prominent boosters George Rountree and Gary Shipman are confident in the direction the department is moving under athletic director Kelly Mehlhants, who signed a four-year contract in July 2007 and declined to comment for this story.

However, long time supporters of UNCW athletics place the blame for the program's general malaise squarely on Mehlhants.

"She has alienated many benefactors, two or three may disagree, but hundreds will support that," said Wilmington attorney Woody White, a UNCW season ticket holder and booster for 14 years. "She’s fallen short in every measure – fundraising, message, morale in the department, no matter what variable you use to measure success to hire an athletic director.”

White said he’s cut his donations significantly, to the “bare minimum” in recent years.

He’s not alone.

PIPELINE GOING DRY?

In 2002, the men’s basketball team enjoyed the unprecedented success of three Colonial Athletic Association championships in four seasons.

Community support and morale were soaring.

Membership in the Seahawk Club surpassed 1,800 and contributions peaked near $2 million in 2002.

However, tax records and documents provided to the StarNews now paint a bleak fiscal outlook for the organization responsible for funding the university’s athletic scholarships.
In the fiscal year ending June 30, 2009, the Seahawk Club received only $705,154 in direct contributions, less than half of the $1.46 million received in 2008.

It has 200 fewer members than a year ago and has declined 1,000 people since 2002. The tally for 2010 was 777 at a recent meeting, lowest in the last decade.

In his first year as Seahawk Club Executive Director, Tim Duncan is trying to reverse that trend.

“We continue to work with our Board of Directors to utilize all our resources,” Duncan said. “We make calls to new businesses, meet new potential members. Our strategy is to make personal visits. The industry average is 15-20 visits a month. I’ve been making 25-30 visits a month.”

Rountree envisions a restructuring of the Seahawk Club, where serious donors make pledges of $10,000 - $50,000, payable over a five-year period.

Duncan feels a turnaround is imminent and points optimistically to a summer relaunch of the W Club, a branch of the Seahawk Club geared toward the university's athletic alumni.

“I definitely understand how we need to get them involved,” said Duncan, who played basketball at Memphis. “Donors and season ticket holders love to see those guys because they understand the mission and serve as testimonies.”

Blame to go around

But some who sat courtside as those past stars scored and dribbled aren’t confident the current leadership can steer the department toward those goals.

Mike Alexander, a 1985 UNCW graduate, has attended every CAA Tournament but one in the past 25 years. He’s a former member of the Rebounders Club, the fundraising group generated for donations specific to UNCW men’s basketball. He lives in Raleigh, but continued to purchase season tickets until last season, when his frustration outweighed his desire to make the two-hour drive on I-40.

He extends the blame to both Mehrtens and DePaolo.

“The message comes from the top,” said Alexander, who faults Mehrtens for prematurely extending Moss’ contract after his second season. “We’re stuck with a chancellor who doesn’t see the reality that academics go hand-in-hand with athletics, especially at a school where you’ve only got one revenue-producing sport.”

That sport, men’s basketball, has also seen a decline in revenue over the past four seasons, as the team plummeted from regular contender to conference doormat.

Average home attendance was 3,100 this season, lowest in 15 seasons and down nearly 100 percent from the program’s heyday in 2002 and 2003 when Brett Blizzard was sinking his 371 career 3-pointers.

Season-ticket sales have declined $100,000 in the last four seasons.

“The universal disapproval of the athletic department, the scrutiny and criticism is rightfully directed at the leader,” said White, a local attorney. “I was hopeful it was going to be better, even when you try to look at the positives there aren’t any. Retaining someone who is such an ineffective leader is a disastrous mistake.”

Mehrtens has one year remaining on her contract. Shipman, who recently joined the UNCW Board of Trustees, remains a vocal supporter.

“I promise you that I’ve personally spoken to administrators all over the United States who have a profound respect for Kelly Mehrtens, especially considering the
circumstances she walked into at UNCW,” Shipman said.

Shipman can only hope that national support soon translates into similar feelings closer to home.

**Coming next:** A look at how the Seahawk Club and the UNCW athletic department work and what they're doing to help keep costs down.

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Loan law to help students

WASHINGTON -- Bigger grants for college students who need them. Relaxed payment terms for students with loans. More money for community colleges and historically black institutions.

The law that President Barack Obama signed Tuesday could mean big changes for hard-pressed students and colleges as the government becomes the primary issuer of student loans. But whom will that affect? And how?

Q: What does the overhaul of student lending do? Basically, it cuts banks out of the government-backed student loan business.

Money for the loans has come either directly from the government or through private financial institutions, which have collected billions of dollars in federal subsidies to protect against default.

Under the changes, banks will no longer act as middlemen, and all colleges and universities must switch to the direct lending program by July 1. Many already have made the switch in anticipation of the new law.

Private lenders can still make student loans that are not backed by the government, and they will continue to have contracts to service some federal loans. But the new law represents a significant change in what has been a multibillion-dollar business for the banking industry.

Q: How much money will the government save? Taxpayers will save $68 billion over the next 11 years, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Q: What will Obama do with the money? How will this affect students and their parents? A chunk of the savings will go toward Pell Grants for college students - to award more grants and to provide larger amounts. Community colleges and institutions with predominantly minority populations also will receive funding.

Q: Will the changes bring down college costs? Sorry, no. Obama acknowledged as much before signing the bill when he urged colleges and universities to "do their part" to hold down costs.

Q: What exactly is happening to Pell Grants? More than $40 billion will go toward the grants, which are targeted toward students from low- and moderate-income families. Between 2013 and 2017, the maximum award will increase to $5,975 from $5,550. The administration also expects more than 820,000 additional awards to be made by the 2020-2021 academic year because of the changes.

Q: How else will students benefit? Students who have low incomes or meet certain other eligibility requirements and who take out loans after July 1, 2014, will see their payments limited to 10 percent of their discretionary income after graduation. Current law caps payments at 15 percent of income.

For students who make their loan payments on time, the government will forgive the balance after 20 years, instead of 25. Public service workers - teachers, nurses, police officers and those in the military -
will see any remaining debt forgiven after just 10 years of repayment.

Q: What's in the new law for community colleges? Community colleges, which enroll more than 6 million students and are growing fast, will receive $2 billion over the next four years for a competitive grant program to provide training and education programs.

Q: What about funding for institutions that serve mostly minority student bodies? These colleges and universities will share $2.55 billion in additional funding over the next decade.

Q: Does anybody lose as a result of the changes? Banks and other financial institutions. Sallie Mae, the biggest student lender, has about 8,500 employees in the student loan program and has said that close to one-third of them may lose their jobs as a result of the overhaul. Sallie Mae still will have contracts to service federal loans.
Judge throws out Giuliani son's suit

The son of former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani was unable to make a federal case against Duke University for kicking him off the golf team.

A federal judge in Greensboro on Tuesday dismissed the 20-month-old case that Andrew Giuliani filed against his alma mater.

U.S. District Judge William Osteen said in his order that there was no evidence of a contract between Giuliani and Duke that assured him a spot on the golf team and a lifetime membership to university "state-of-the-art" golf facilities.

In the lawsuit, filed in the Middle District of North Carolina in July 2008, Giuliani claimed Duke reneged on a $200,000 contract with him when the golf coach cut him from the team.

Giuliani tried to persuade the court that a Duke golf coach entered a contract with him when telling him in high school that if he came to Duke and paid $200,000 in tuition and fees for his four-year undergraduate education that he could try out for a spot on the golf team and have lifetime access to "state-of-the-art" golf facilities.

Duke disputed Giuliani's depiction of that as a contract, and in numerous court documents and hearings Duke argued that such statements described potential benefits available to the then-aspiring professional golfer.

In May 2009, Wallace Dixon, a federal magistrate judge assigned to the matter, suggested that the case be thrown out of court in an opinion peppered with golf terms and a reference to "Caddyshack," the comedy starring Bill Murray. Dixon described Giuliani's claims as "a swing and a miss" and "attempting to take a mulligan."

Robert Ekstrand, the Durham lawyer representing Giuliani, argued against the recommendation and asked for a federal judge to hear the case. Osteen heard arguments in February.

The gist of the discussion was what a student should be able to expect when paying $200,000 in tuition and fees. Duke lawyers said the money provided the student an opportunity to an education. Ekstrand argued that Giuliani was guaranteed an opportunity to play golf on the team and at campus facilities.

Duke contended that Giuliani squandered his opportunity to play on the golf team after flipping a putter, breaking a driver, gunning his car engine in a golf course parking lot and throwing an apple in the face of a teammate. The misconduct, Duke lawyers said, got Giuliani bumped from the team in 2008.

Now a Duke graduate, Giuliani is playing golf professionally.

Attempts to reach Ekstrand on Tuesday were unsuccessful.

Duke lauded the judge's decision.
"We are gratified the Court agreed that our coaches have the authority to dismiss a student-athlete from an intercollegiate sports team in circumstances such as those present in this case," Michael Schoenfeld, vice president for public affairs and government relations, said in a statement.

Staff writer Eric Ferreri contributed to this report.

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First to go to college, they stay the course

University of Cincinnati offers special housing, help to ‘Gen 1’ students

By Krista Ramsey and Cliff Peale
USA TODAY

CINCINNATI — If 18-year-old Demarcus Jones doesn’t get up promptly for his 10 a.m. math class at the University of Cincinnati, he’ll first get a text message from Judy Mause.
Then she’ll arrive in person, banging on his dormitory door.
Mause calls it “intrusive advising.”
Jones is one of 24 freshmen living in Gen-1 House, an off-campus residence for low-income, first-generation college students. Mause, the program’s coordinator, will do everything from wake-up calls to checking in with professors to make sure Gen-1 students keep their grades up and fit into campus life.

If left to the odds, only three of the 24 Gen-1 House freshmen would graduate.
Roughly 30% of entering freshmen in the USA are first-generation college students, and 24% — 4.5 million — are both first-gens and low income. Nationally, 89% of low-income first-gens leave college within six years without a degree. More than a quarter leave after their first year — four times the dropout rate of higher-income second-generation students.

They’re driven out by a host of factors, from financial need to little understanding of what to expect of college. Many struggle with the feeling that they don’t belong on campus.
University of Cincinnati president Greg Williams, himself a first-generation college graduate (from Ball State University in Muncie, Ind.), calls Gen-1 House “a program that really resonates with me in so many ways. First-generation students are four times more likely to drop out. This is a national crisis.”

Pledging to do their very best

Colleges are trying a variety of programs to hold onto first-gens.
At Fresno State University in California, faculty and staff who were first-generation college graduates share their own stories with students. Bay Path College in Longmeadow, Mass., reaches out to parents of first-gens to enlist their support.

But only the University of Cincinnati has housing exclusively for first-gens, a program that is drawing national attention. All 24 students who moved into Gen-1 House in September 2009, and 11 of the 14 in 2008 when it opened, still are in college.

“My initial thought is that’s the best of all possibilities for first-generation students, particularly having that transition supported into the first year in college,” says Chandra Taylor Smith, director of the Washington, D.C.-based Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, which advocates for low-income, first-gen and disabled college students.
Gen-1 House students get more support and attention than typical freshmen, and a lot more structure.

To be in the program, the students must sign a contract agreeing to an 11:30 curfew on weeknights and 1:30 a.m. on weekends. They must observe daily “quiet hours” in which “no noise may be heard from another room, the hallway or any common area.”

They must maintain a 2.25 GPA and agree to no alcohol, drugs, no going home the first five weeks on campus or working at a job more than 20 hours a week.

“We have a very structured environment,” says Gen-1 House resident Josh Giles, a freshman. “I think a lot of our outside distractions hurt many students.”

Like his housemates, Giles is willing to trade personal freedoms for the support that comes with Gen-1 House — tutoring, mentoring, a special study-skills class, and especially the close relationships among residents and staff.

Hanging out, hunkering down

On one hand, the students are like their peers. Evenings, they hang out around a large-screen TV in a first-floor living area, and they enjoy the nights Mause brings in lasagna.

But they are a sober and thoughtful group, aware of the unique opportunity they’ve been given and determined not to waste it.

“We had a choice to be here or to be in another dorm,” says resident Tracy Steagall, who worked in car washes and at Wal-Mart to get to college. “We didn’t have to do this.”

Though many have their tuition paid by grants and the university pays for their meal plan, most Gen-1 students work part-time jobs or borrow for the $6,300 annual housing costs. The program also gets donations — last week a Cincinnati businessman contributed $165,000, by far its biggest private donation yet.

The students say they feel pressure from being their families’ trailblazers but find empathy and support in one another.

“We all need to stick together,” says resident Robert Golby. “For the third-generation student, they know what college is. For the first-generation students, we’re slowly putting all the pieces together.”

Ramsey and Peale report for The Cincinnati Enquirer.
"A very structured environment": Demarcus Jones, left, Isa Shakir, Josh Giles, Ndeye Ba and LaRue North at work in the study room at the Gen-1 House.

Trailblazers: Tracy Steagall, left, and Brionna Brown are the first generation of their families to attend college.