

Opinions

IN OUR OPINION

Leader supports community We've got your back

It's rare that global or national news makes the pages of our newspaper. We are committed to news affecting our local communities and residents. In the case of COVID-19, the global story is a local story because it has quickly impacted each and every one of us. Each of us is witnessing a historic event, and the newspaper is recording it as it unfolds.

Instead of spring sports, festivals and other events, we're chronicling efforts by local governments to provide vital services and measures by our school district to continue educational services to students after classrooms were unexpectedly closed. Soon, we hope to highlight the tireless service of healthcare professionals amid the pandemic.

We are also working on a special section to recognize the Class of 2020, students who will miss so many of the traditional rites of passage we hold dear.

Years from now, where will anyone be able to find information about life in Stone County during the COVID-19 pandemic? Only in the *Stone County Leader* archive, no doubt. We've got your back.

The *Leader* staff has kept working and publishing on our regular schedule and are doing what we can to keep readers informed about where they can find needed services and information about the businesses that are still operating in full or limited fashion. We've got your back.

However, the newspaper is not immune to the financial impact. Advertising levels are dropping drastically, and we are taking steps to trim costs where we can, but the newspaper will not cease publishing (even if we are eventually restricted to a digital-only format, which we do NOT foresee at this point).

We encourage readers to support local restaurants and favorite stores by ordering take-out meals and gift cards, and we also hope you will support our efforts by subscribing and placing advertising. Consider purchasing a gift subscription for a friend or college student, or extend your own. Place an advertisement congratulating a local student on an achievement or showing support for health care workers, law enforcement or first responders. We can help design an ad to fit any budget.

We're your neighbors — and we've got your back.

Letters from readers

Encouraging others to donate if possible

To the editor:
Our little town is going through tough times. It's so sad to see Main Street without the cars, pedestrians and musicians. Some of our families are having financial difficulties and are waiting for help from the stimulus payments, unemployment benefits, and payroll protection loans.

There are some of us lucky enough that our income is not impacted by the COVID-19 economic fallout. For us, the stimulus payment of \$1,200 per adult is a windfall. How should we spend it? We want that money to aid our community, so my wife

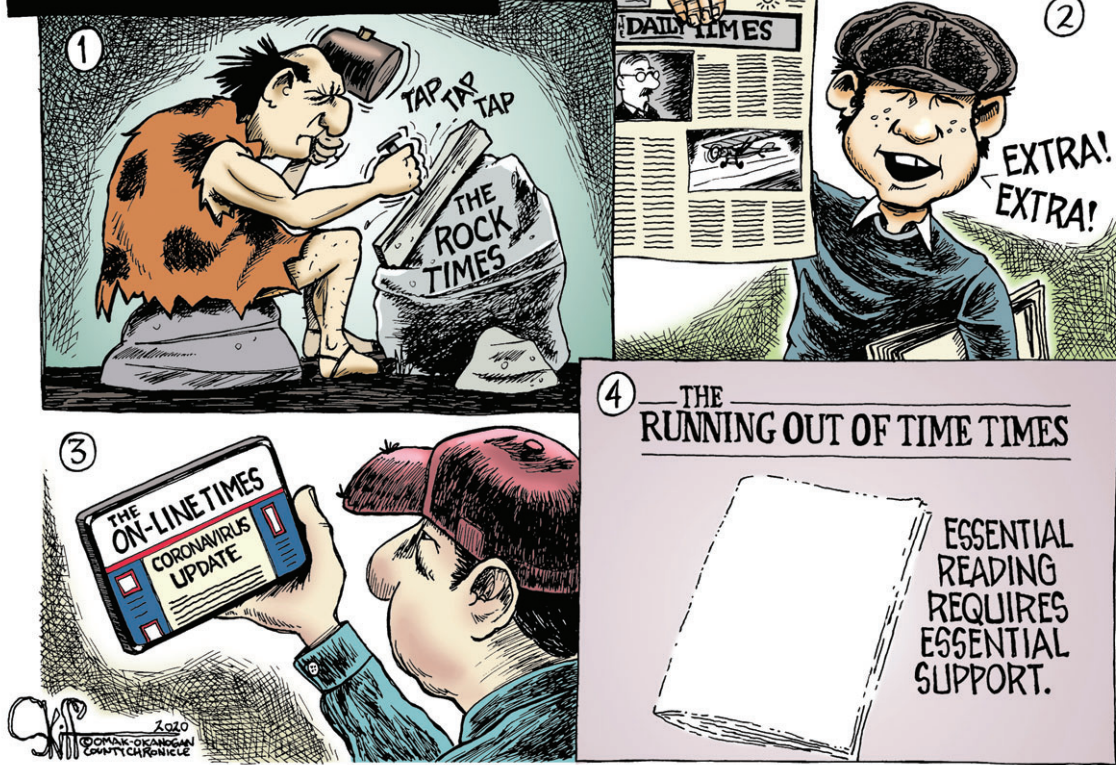
and I are donating ours to the Dorcas Food Room. And I challenge others who can afford it to donate to local charities.

Everyone in the community, even those in dire need, can help Stone County by spending their stimulus money locally. It helps our businesses directly, and your sales tax is necessary to support our first responders, keep our roads, water lines, and sewers in good shape, and for many other things we take for granted.

Looking forward to better times.

Roger and Peggy Stafford
Mountain View

THE EVOLUTION of LOCAL NEWS



INDEPENDENT ARKANSAS

By Steve Brawner

Foster system faces challenges

Who are the unsung heroes of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic? Let's add child abuse investigator Rachel Speights of Texarkana to that list.

The 37-year-old walks into strangers' homes and interviews children, their sometimes hostile (and sometimes drinking or drugged) parents, and others, and then decides if the children should be removed.

It takes guts for Speights to do her job under normal circumstances, let alone during a pandemic. She conducted six face-to-face interviews in two homes April 7 while wearing a mask.

"Yes, the coronavirus is here, and yes, it's a very scary thing, but I don't let it stop me protecting these children because these children are vulnerable and they need us, and if I don't go in there, then who's going to go in there and help them?" she told me.

Speights is an investigation supervisor managing five counties for the Division of Children and Family Services. Like many other employers, DCFS has had to improvise during this crazy time. More work is being done remotely or by videoconference. But as Director Mischa Martin told me, some things still must be done in person.

"We have not shut down the child welfare system. ... What we've messaged is, we want to use technology when we can, but for that ... initial child abuse investigation, we have to see the victim," she said.

Children removed by the state from their biological families live with foster families or in group settings while their cases are being resolved. The biological families receive support in hopes their children can be returned to them. Unfortunately, sometimes the state must find the children

another permanent home with a relative or through adoption by another family.

The state's foster children population has risen by about 150 in recent weeks to 4,445 as of Wednesday. That's because courts are no longer holding in-person hearings because of the pandemic, so fewer cases are working their way toward completion.

Meanwhile, fewer children are entering the system, at least for now. Fewer calls were made to the state's child maltreatment hotline (800-482-5964) in the last two weeks of March because schools, a so-called "mandated reporter" required to report suspected abuse, are closed.

Martin told me foster parents were reluctant to accept placements during the first week of the coronavirus epidemic, but DCFS has tried to communicate with them to allay their fears, and placements are continuing. She said foster parents have been "amazing."

No foster child brought into the system has tested positive for COVID-19, but two children have contracted the disease after they were placed. They and their foster parents are being quarantined. No foster parent has tested positive as of this writing.

Foster parents have special challenges and costs as they navigate the pandemic's new realities, which is why DCFS made a one-time \$125 per-child increase in families' stipends. Jonathan Bailey of Benton is helping raise three foster children along with his and his wife's three children. In a text conversation, he said school-issued computers "are absolutely everywhere. The amount of food we are going through has increased for sure. (And we've gone through our share of TP as well! What many would call stocking up, we call a normal trip to Sam's.)"

Meanwhile, more foster

families are being recruited to help carry the load. (There's never enough.) The state works extensively with a faith-based organization, The CALL, that recruits and trains parents. Executive Director Lauri Currier is anticipating more foster families will be needed as already struggling biological families face isolation and economic hardship because of the pandemic. The CALL cancelled trainings in March but last weekend held its first online training, which attracted 176 individuals from 93 families from 32 counties.

In a perfect world, none of these roles would exist. No one would be needed to investigate child maltreatment cases, and there would be no need to place a child with another family, temporarily or permanently.

That world didn't exist before the pandemic and doesn't exist now. As a result, while most of us are trying to keep our distance, Speights must still investigate strangers' homes while foster parents welcome strangers' kids into theirs.

As Speights said, if they don't go in there and help, who will?

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Have an idea for a news story or photo feature?
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Letters and other opinion pieces must contain the author's name, and will not be printed anonymously. Address and telephone number are required for verification, but only town name will be printed.

Priority will be given to letters that are fewer than 400 words and are clear, concise and submitted exclusively to the *Leader*. All letters are subject to editing for clarity.