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# Beltrami County has first coronavirus case

**By Matthew Liedke**  
mliedke@bemidjipioneer.com

**BEMIDJI** — The coronavirus made its way to Beltrami County this week with Sanford Health announcing the first positive case on Wednesday.

Sanford Health of Bemidji announced that the patient had a positive test of COVID-19 in a release sent out on Wednesday morning. The patient is believed to have become ill after



Wilcox

being exposed to the SARS-CoV-2 virus while traveling internationally. The patient is under self-isolation at their residence since returning from travel and has been experiencing mild symptoms of the virus. According to Dr. David

Wilcox, vice president medical officer at Sanford, the patient reached out to their primary care provider on Monday, March 23.

"This couldn't have gone any better in terms of community spread," Wilcox said. "The person was suspicious upon returning, isolated, waited until a business day and called on what to do next. They went through a screening process and

didn't come to the clinic." Sanford has advised the patient to stay home, except to receive medical care. They've also been asked to separate from other people in the home, limit contact with pets and animals, and wear a face mask when around others when entering the facility.

In the release, Sanford officials stated they will continue to follow up with the patient

regarding their symptoms and determine whether additional care is needed. The patient is going to remain under self-isolation until they are no longer contagious, meaning they have not had a fever for at least 72 hours and other symptoms have improved, and at least seven days have passed since symptoms first appeared.

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## FILLING THE GAP

The United Way and Bemidji Community Food Shelf have teamed up to keep the food shelf running during the coronavirus pandemic. Pictured from left: Shannon Lee, United Way of Bemidji Area director of marketing and events; Mary Mitchell, Bemidji Community Food Shelf executive director; and Denae Alamano, United Way of Bemidji Area executive director.  
Annalise Braught / Bemidji Pioneer

## Organizations work together to meet community needs

**By Annalise Braught**  
abraught@bemidjipioneer.com

**E**veryone needs to eat. That's why organizations around the Bemidji area have rallied together to ensure everyone in the community is fed, and those at risk are able to stay safe at home during the coronavirus pandemic.

Many members in the greater Bemidji community rely on organizations like the Bemidji Community Food Shelf to get through the month. And according to Mary Mitchell, executive director at the food shelf, having access to food

is more important than ever, as so many are without work right now. But with more restrictions and safety precautions being put in place on an almost daily basis, it became imperative that older volunteers who usually help keep the food shelf running needed to stick closer to home. This posed some major problems.

"As things began to escalate, Mary started evaluating her staff and their risks and even her own age and risks, and she began thinking that they may even have to close," said Denae Alamano, executive director of the

United Way of Bemidji Area. So, the two organizations came together and formed a better solution - swapping out the older volunteers for younger people from around the community.

Even some of the staff has been switched out, so that older staff members can stay safe at home. Shannon Lee, director of marketing and events at the United Way, began working at the food shelf on Monday filling in for Debbie Johnson, the volunteer coordinator at the food shelf.

"Shannon is still doing her regular

job duties for the United Way," Alamano explained. "But she's also training in volunteers from here and helping out in whatever way she can."

Lee said she hasn't minded combining her two jobs for the time being. "It's been really nice to be able to help the food shelf in this tough time and fill that gap with resources at the United Way. It's kind of like a no-brainer," she said. "If I can train in volunteers and work remotely here to be able to keep food shelf staff safe and healthy, then I'm all in."

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## City declares emergency to streamline COVID-19 response

**By Matthew Liedke**  
mliedke@bemidjipioneer.com

**BEMIDJI** — The city of Bemidji on Friday joined the state and federal governments in declaring an emergency in response to the coronavirus.

In passing a resolution over a telephone meeting, the

Bemidji City Council established a local emergency. In doing so, the city manager, the emergency management director and other designated officials are authorized to bypass existing city policies and procedures if it means a better response to federal or

state coronavirus directions. Additionally, all of the city's departments and staff are directed to operate and support the response to the emergency, under the coordination of the city manager and the local emergency management team. This can

include implementing new employee protocols and staff strategies, as well as operational strategies and processes to ensure that public services are maintained.

The resolution, approved unanimously by the council, also authorized Bemidji Mayor Rita Albrecht and City Manager Nate Mathews to approve any necessary agreements, contracts or related documents necessary to implement corrective action to the emergency.

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Mathews

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# Local orgs helping Bemidji economy ride out COVID-19 crisis

By Matthew Liedke  
mliedke@bemidjipioneer.com

**BEMIDJI** — As local businesses continue to weather the storm of coronavirus-related closures and changes, Bemidji's economic organizations are working to help keep entrepreneurs standing.

One of the most critical actions is the administering of a loan program by Greater Bemidji Economic Development. Greater Bemidji has been selected as the certified lender of the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development's emergency loan program to assist businesses.

The loans will range from \$2,500 to \$35,000 and be based on the firm's economic injury and the financial need. According to a release, the loan can be paid back over a five year period, with a six month deferral on principal payment with partial forgiveness.

The DEED loans will be 50%



Hengel

forfeivable and offered at a 0% interest rate. DEED is estimating the loan program will provide resources to between 1,200 and 5,000 businesses.

"The state emergency loan program was created specifically for industries and businesses shut down as part of their executive orders," said Greater Bemidji Executive Director Dave Hengel. "They're eligible to receive some support from the state and they'll be run through our office. If you fit in that category or think you fit in that category, I encourage those people to reach out directly to our office."

Greater Bemidji has been especially busy lately, as Hengel said he was contacted by 51 business representatives in a 36-hour period this week.

"They're looking for support

and their stories are tragic," Hengel said. "I'm particularly concerned about our small, locally owned businesses. As a community, we're doing all we can to support our businesses, but this disaster certainly will have a long term impact on our economy in the Bemidji area."

Moving forward, Hengel said it's important for businesses to stay in contact with their banks. "They know your resources and they know your business," Hengel said. "They also know some resources to get you through."

Another option available at the moment, according to Hengel, is the Small Business Administration's Federal Disaster Loan program.

"I'm encouraging all business owners to put in an application now," Hengel said. "It's going to take some time, so there's no harm in getting your application in the process."

At the Bemidji Area Cham-



Randall

ber of Commerce, meanwhile, Executive Director Abby Randall said the organization has received feedback on the situation through a recent survey.

"Early on in this process, when we knew that restaurants were going to be shut down and we knew that there would be a threat to local revenue sources, we created a survey for businesses to fill out," Randall said. "What we're finding is a lot of businesses just need information on what they should do in terms of financing. I think the mood right now is that everything is coming so fast. So everyone is just doing their best to find information and make sense of it."

Like Greater Bemidji, Randall said the Chamber is also directing businesses to helpful services.

"We're encouraging busi-

nesses to visit the state's unemployment website and reassuring businesses that if that's a measure you need to take, look into it," Randall said. "I think a lot of businesses are feeling bad about having to lay off employees, they don't want it to happen. But right now, we can reassure them that these are unprecedented times and we have to do what it takes to keep our businesses healthy until we can ride this out."

"The challenge here is the uncertainty," Hengel said. "How long will this last and how long people will be unemployed. That's the challenge."

For more information about unemployment services, visit [www.umn.org](http://www.umn.org). More information about DEED can be found at: <https://mn.gov/deed>. The Chamber's website is [www.bemidji.org](http://www.bemidji.org) and Greater Bemidji's is [www.greaterbemidji.com](http://www.greaterbemidji.com).

Readers can reach Pioneer reporter Matthew Liedke at (218) 333-9771.

## TOGETHER

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As an added precaution, the food shelf is now strictly offering parking lot distribution on Mondays and Wednesdays. This means that anyone in need can drive through the parking lot, and volunteers will bring pre-packaged boxes of food out to each person's vehicle.

Families with a household size of four and less can receive one box of food, and those with five or more can receive two boxes.

Alamano explained that the volunteers are made up of groups from Sanford Health, the Boys and Girls Club, First National Bank, Bemidji Area Schools and more.

On distribution days, volunteers are helping stock items in the warehouse and bringing boxes out to people's vehicles and on Tuesdays and Fridays they are boxing up food to be distributed.

Mitchell explained that even though they are happy people will still receive food, she is disappointed they are not able to choose items for themselves. Since the food shelf recently transitioned to a Super Shelf, this gave their customers more of a variety of choices when shopping each month.

"So to go back to this pre-packaged box thing was just a bummer, but it's better than nothing and it's still food," Mitchell said.

She added that no one is complaining about it though. "People have just been happy to get food right now," Mitchell said. "I have had several people tell me that when I've apologized for how things are now. They just say, 'Oh we're just happy you're here and you're open.'"

The amount of food people are receiving now is still relatively the same as it would be if they were coming in and shopping for themselves.

"We measured it out and it is about 15 pounds of food in each box, which still ends up being around the usual 10 meals worth of food," Mitchell said.

Mitchell mentioned that for those who may not have their own vehicles or transportation, the Bemidji Bus Line can bring people to pick up boxes of food as well.



Annalise Braught / Bemidji Pioneer

Boys and Girls Club volunteers Morgan Morgenstern and McKenna Rohe load a box of food into a vehicle on Wednesday morning at the Bemidji Community Food Shelf.

## Everyone's safety

There are still many safety precautions being put in place to keep each group of volunteers safe, such as working in small groups, cleaning things regularly and washing their hands as often as possible.

"We have a plan in place that if someone gets sick or someone in their household gets sick, the whole group will be swapped out for a different one," Mary Mitchell said.

Alamano explained there has been no shortage of volunteers so far. "There have been so many people calling the United Way either with a resource, a need or a want to volunteer," Alamano said. "And so we have a good list of people and volunteers ready to step up and help when it's needed, knowing that food access is a huge deal and we need the food shelf to stay open."

So, for now, it is looking like the food shelf will be able to be open and available to the community as long as the volunteers keep things up.

"We are so grateful," Mitchell said. "Because we really wanted to fill that need and be able to step up during this time. Knowing that we might not be able to was really heart-wrenching, so we are just so glad."

## Partnering with the community

The United Way is entirely supported by community donations and

volunteers, and Alamano said they are doing as much as they can to give back to the community in whatever ways they are able.

"We don't get any state or federal funding of any kind, we are totally based on what the community gives," Alamano said. "So I just think everyone should be proud that we are able to step in like this and help, because it's only possible with their support."

Alamano explained that things haven't always operated this way. "We've always been this funding agency, but three years ago my board and I went through a strategic planning process to discuss what it means to be a partner agency," Alamano said. "Because that is what we call them, but if we are just giving them funds, how are we partnering?"

She explained that their team decided to partner with agencies in order to fill in gaps and meet needs in the community.

"So when this all came up last Monday, and calling those essential places like the soup kitchen, the food bank and food shelf, we found a lot of different things we could step in and do," Alamano said.

Some of the other things they have worked on include a hygiene drive with Lueken's Village Foods North and South and helping to come up with activities for children in area shelters.

"A few of the shelters we partner with were looking for children's activities and so we

partnered with Compass Rose to put craft kits together, and Ashley Stevens from Thrivent Financial stepped up to pay for that," Alamano said.

The crafting kit bundles each include the supplies to make six different crafts. Anyone who wishes to support the project can purchase a kit for donation or for themselves and a portion of the dollars will go toward the craft kit project.

"There are so many different things going on, but personally I am most proud of this right now," Alamano said. "Keeping the food shelf open has made me really proud of the United Way and what we can accomplish together."

She emphasized that none of it would be possible without the community support they have received.

"We owe a big thank you to the community, because without their support of the United Way we wouldn't be able to do this," Alamano said. "This is a critical time to be stepping up and taking action for Bemidji and our whole community."

Anyone who would like more information on the United Way can visit their website at [www.unitedwaybemidji.org](http://www.unitedwaybemidji.org), call (218) 444-8929 or find them on Facebook.

For more information on the Bemidji Community Food Shelf, visit <https://bcfsmn.org> or call (218) 444-6580.

Annalise Braught is the managing editor at the Pioneer. She can be reached at (218) 333-9771.

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## Community spread not yet here

"It is important for community members to be aware of the possibility of community spread," Wilcox said in the release.

"However, it is even more important that everyone acts calmly and rationally when seeking medical care. If you have a positive COVID-19 exposure or test, you will go home and do many of the same things you would if you have influenza. We need the community to follow those guidelines to ensure that healthcare staff are able to provide care not just for COVID-19 cases, but also other life-threatening health concerns as well."

To mitigate the spread, Sanford is encouraging residents to practice social distancing by keeping a six-foot space between each other. Additionally, residents are asked to avoid close contact with people who are sick, avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth, to stay home if they're sick and clean frequently touched objects and surfaces.

The public is also encouraged to cover their coughs and sneeze with their elbow and wash hands using soap and water for at least 20 seconds using an alcohol-based sanitizer.

"Now more than ever we need everyone to do their part to mitigate the spread of this virus, and support one another," said Susan Jarvis, president and CEO of Sanford Health of Northern Minnesota in the release. "The spread of this virus is something that our organization has been monitoring and preparing for, but we need the community's help to protect those who are most vulnerable. We know that social distancing is the most effective step we can take in slowing down or stopping the spread of COVID-19. We need everyone's help in making this happen."

Moving forward, Joy Johnson, Sanford Health of Northern Minnesota vice president Joy Johnson said testing of COVID-19 will likely increase if more cases are discovered.

"One of the things people are confused about is why we're not doing more testing right now," Johnson said. "One of the criteria that many people in other communities are qualifying under is that they've been exposed to someone with COVID-19. In communities where there's widespread disease, the answer to that is going to be 'yes' more often. But in Bemidji, the answer to that question is going to be primarily 'no.' But when we have broader community spread, we will be testing more people, because they'll be answering that question 'yes.'"



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## EMERGENCY

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Before the resolution was approved, language was added to inform the council immediately about any of those potential agreements and contracts.

"The city charter specifies that the city manager has discretion of up to \$20,000 for expenditure decisions. That's going to be kept in place," Mathews said. "When it comes to entering into contracts,

we have no policy on that, but we will be communicating with all of our departments, and we wouldn't anticipate going down the road with any major expenditures without discussing that with the council."

Later in the meeting, Mathews also said the Sanford Center, the city-owned event facility, is available for use during this emergency.

"We have that building ready to go," Mathews said. "We've informed Sanford Health that it is ready and available, should we need more space for things. We have used

it very well the last couple of weeks for food distribution."

The resolution comes 10 days after the city closed buildings including Neilson Reise Arena, the Bemidji Public Library, the Carnegie Library, all park buildings, the Tourist Information Center and the history museum. According to the city's website, City Hall is also closed. Residents are asked to call (218) 759-3560 for utility bill questions or visit the city's website: [www.ci.bemidji.mn.us](http://www.ci.bemidji.mn.us).

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