One small South Carolina county's big coronavirus problem

April 29 2020, by Sammy Fretwell, The State (Columbia, S.c.)

Credit: CC0 Public Domain

It may have been the dollar bills he exchanged with a cashier at a mini-mart or the merchandise he picked up while shopping at a large retail store.

But something Wayne Wells did exposed him to the [coronavirus](#), a disease sweeping across South Carolina.

By mid-April, he was in the hospital, fighting death as the coronavirus squeezed his chest, making him gasp and cough, alone in a sterile room without his family.

His recovery was slow, but after 10 days, he finally emerged from the hospital, thankful and determined to warn others about the "very, very terrible" disease no one should endure.

Wells, 61, is one of the lucky ones in Clarendon County, a community dealing with an unusually large number of coronavirus cases.

Clarendon, an eastern South Carolina county known for tangy barbecue sauce and its proximity to Lake Marion, has been hit harder by the coronavirus than most any other place in South Carolina.

The county leads the state in per capita cases of the disease, and it is among the top five in COVID 19-related deaths, even though Clarendon has only 34,000 residents. Since early March, at least 12 deaths have been verified in Clarendon County.

Only four much larger counties—Richland, Greenville, Lexington and Horry—have had as many or more people die of the coronavirus as Clarendon County, according to statistics released by state officials Monday. Each of those counties has at least 298,000 residents. Data released Monday showed Greenville led the state with 20 coronavirus related deaths, with Richland second with 19. Horry and Lexington had 12 deaths.

The ZIP code serving Manning, the county's main population center with 4,000 residents, has had 120 cases of coronavirus. State health officials

suspect the community may have as many as 737 cases that have yet to be verified.

Wells, an Army veteran and furniture maker who grew up in rural Clarendon County, said the coronavirus threat is real and should be a concern to everyone in the area, which is about a 70-minute drive east of Columbia..

The Silver community resident said he began to feel bad on Thursday, April 9, with his health deteriorating the next day. Feverish and coughing, he could hardly breathe by Saturday, April 11. So he visited the hospital in Manning and was admitted.

"The first three or four nights were really rough," he said. "I had shortness of breath. I was coughing a lot. My legs were hurting too. After five days, my legs were hurting really bad, so they started giving me pain medicine."

Wells said he has had some underlying health problems, including seizures that may have contributed to his bout the coronavirus. But those conditions never bothered him badly enough that he could not get around—until he entered the hospital.

"It felt like somebody dropping a brick on you because of the coughing," he said of how he felt. "I had to have oxygen the whole time I was in there.."

"I could not talk or say anything. I didn't have the energy. I was out of breath."

Why Clarendon?

Nobody knows why Manning and Clarendon County have had such a

time with the coronavirus. Some of it may be because of large gatherings that occurred before anyone knew to social distance.

A funeral on March 14 that drew several hundred people has sparked substantial talk. A woman who reportedly attended the funeral died weeks after of the coronavirus.

The problem may also relate to Manning's proximity as a stop off Interstate 95 and the lack of information getting to rural residents about staying out of large groups.

Wells, Sen. Kevin Johnson, D-Clarendon, and Manning Mayor Julia Nelson said they're aware of large gatherings that have occurred, long after Gov. Henry McMaster implored people to stay home to reduce the risk of spreading COVID 19.

People having cookouts at their homes or getting together to gossip at rural convenience stores are a concern. Some people don't understand the gravity of the disease until it touches them personally, Wells said.

"They think it is somebody else's problem, as long as they don't have it," he said.

Nelson said her sense is that many of the coronavirus cases in Clarendon County are tied to the workplace or careless people who visit large big box retailers without taking proper precautions. Some churches have also continued to meet.

People who work in the home health care industry or in nursing homes, or their patients, have been hurt, she said.

"It's really impacting us pretty bad," Nelson said. "From what we can tell, the main people being impacted are those taking care of individuals,

either in a facility or providing home service, and those working in different plants or industries."

While Clarendon is having troubles, few people other than Wells are sharing their stories of battling COVID-19.

Those who have been touched by COVID-19 fear they will be forever shunned because they have contracted the disease or their loved ones have died from the coronavirus, Wells and Nelson said.

"People think they are outcasts," Wells said of the perceived stigma of having had coronavirus. "They think it will follow them the rest of their lives."

Mayor Nelson, who grew up in Manning, said she's never seen such a threat.

Hurricanes like Hugo, the legendary 1989 storm, have periodically smashed the community in and around Manning, but Nelson said the coronavirus is a threat no one can see.

"With COVID-19 it has been totally different," she said. "It's invisible and no charts with predictions as to where it may go next or when it might end."

The problem has been such a concern that a local disabilities and special needs program shut down. The program bused people from across the county to the old Manning High School, where they would work or receive attention during the day.

Tough journey

For Wells, a father of two, one of the hardest parts of his ordeal was

facing the disease without seeing his family. Because the coronavirus is so contagious—and potentially deadly—the hospital in Manning didn't let visitors see patients going through the ordeal, he said. Many hospitals have similar policies.

He tried communicating with [family members](#) via [cell phone](#) or on Facebook, but "the first three days I could not talk," Wells said. "I didn't have the energy. I was out of breath."

He's a volunteer at the local hospital that treated him, but Wells said he doesn't think working there exposed him. He quit working weeks before he was diagnosed with the coronavirus.

Wells thinks a handful of trips he took to the store to buy merchandise may have caused the coronavirus infection, despite his best efforts to avoid getting COVID-19.

"I was doing all the precautions," he said. "I was washing my hands, disinfecting my house. I was wearing my mask. But a couple of times I went out, I handled some cash. I'm thinking the cash money did it."

Regardless, Wells said he hopes people will learn from his experience. His ordeal should reinforce to people the danger of a COVID-19 infection and it should show them that there is hope, he said.

"You can get better," he said, noting that his faith in God pulled him through.

His survival cheered up members of the staff at McLeod Health's Manning hospital, said Stacy Mosier, the hospital system's volunteer coordinator. When he was wheeled out of the hospital last week, staff members lined the hallways, clapping loudly for their friend and fellow volunteer.

"I'm getting tearful now, I was overwhelmed," Mosier said. "It's a reminder of how precious life is."

©2020 The State (Columbia, S.C.)
Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.