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Patchwork Pandemic: How politics and personal choice fueled the Chattanooga region's COVID-19 crisis



How politics and personal choice fueled the Chattanooga region's COVID-19 crisis

By Elizabeth Fite

This is the first story in a three-part series

Since the early days of the pandemic, leaders around the world have relied on data to make decisions with important public health and economic consequences, such as when to lift social distancing restrictions, allow public gatherings or reopen businesses — some of the many measures taken to help curb the spread of COVID-19.

The coronavirus is highly contagious and spreads rapidly from person to person through respiratory droplets. It's also a new virus, meaning it's not well understood, there are few effective treatments and most people have no immunity through prior infection or vaccination.

COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, is more deadly than seasonal influenza and particularly fatal for certain high-risk individuals, such as older adults and people with underlying health conditions.

For these reasons, health officials say simple steps — maintaining safe distance from others, wearing face coverings in public, practicing good hand hygiene and avoiding large gatherings, particularly indoors — must be taken to mitigate the spread, save lives and avoid overwhelming the health care system.

However, the degree to which state and local governments should implement policies to facilitate these behaviors — and the public's willingness to accept them — is fiercely debated and varies widely across the region and the country.

To better understand potential associations between mitigation efforts and community spread of the virus, the Chattanooga Times Free Press tracked key events and policy decisions in several area counties — Hamilton, Bradley and Marion counties in Tennessee and Whitfield, Catoosa and Walker counties in Georgia — from March through December. Those key events were then visualized alongside publicly available COVID-19 data for new daily cases, new daily hospitalizations and deaths over the same time period to create a graphic representation of each county's "epidemic curve."

Case data was converted to a per-100,000-resident rate to account for differences in population sizes, and a line represents the 7-day average case rate — which gives a more accurate picture of whether the curve of new cases is rising or falling, since case reports can vary widely from day to day.

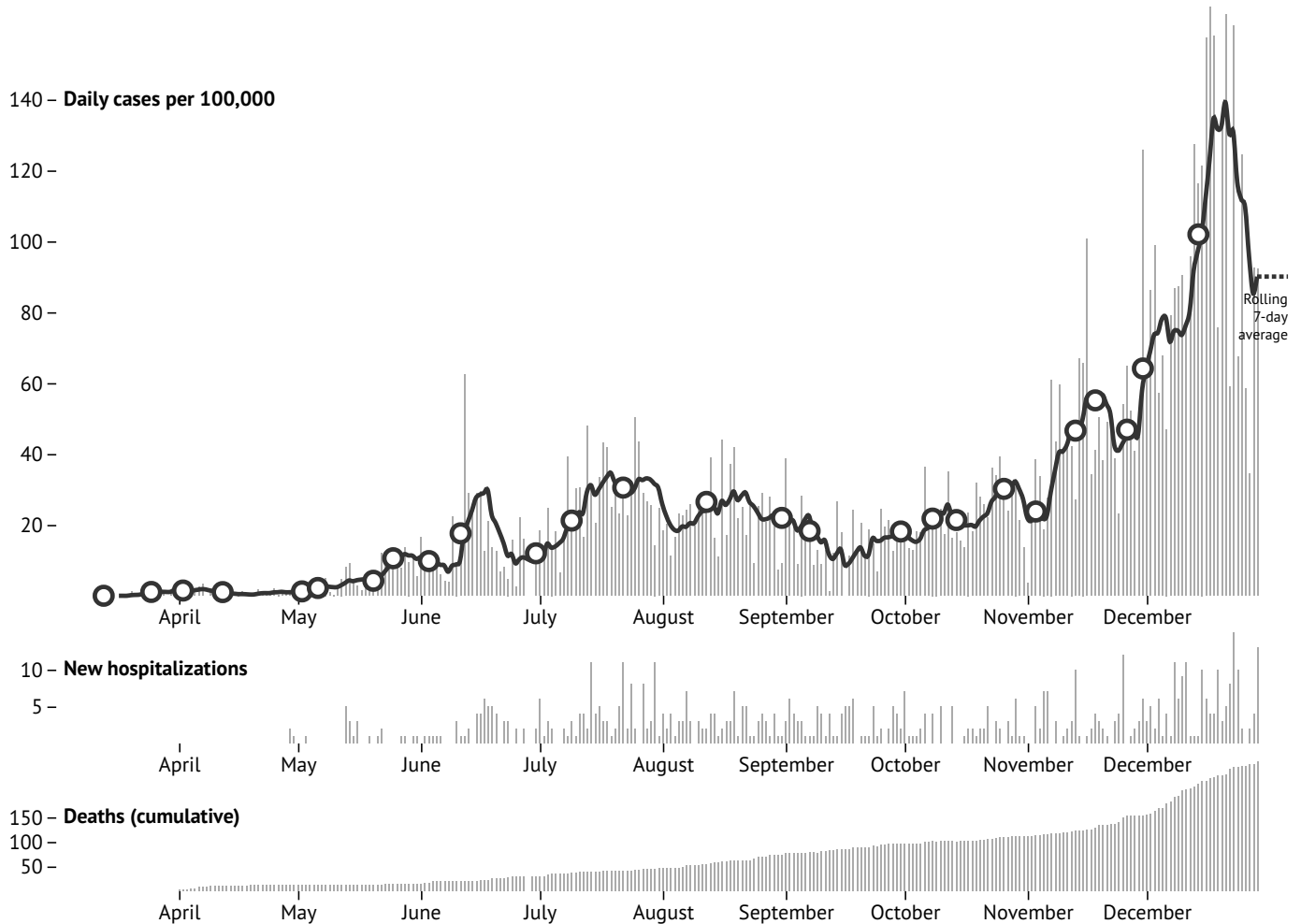
These data points were chosen because when combined, they are three of the key metrics officials use to track COVID-19. The data is also made publicly available each day through both state's departments of health, allowing for the best "apples-

to-apples” comparison across counties, although Georgia does not release daily hospitalization data at the county level.

Select county

Hamilton ▼

Circles on the timeline identify key events that occurred this year. These include major public policy decisions, holidays and school reopenings. Hover over an event to learn more about what was happening on that day.



Timeline shows the number of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths from March to December 2020. Across the region, the number of cases per 100,000 spiked in July and the last two months of the year. The timeline identifies key moments during this period, including policy decisions, school reopenings and holidays. Hover over an event in the timeline to learn more about a particular date.

Daily hospitalization data for Georgia counties is unavailable.

Data: [Tennessee Department of Health](#) and [Georgia Department of Health](#).

Visualization by [David Morton](#).

The analysis found a patchwork of regulations implemented at different times and places across the region. Combined with a dynamic pandemic — meaning cases and deaths often rise and fall in different places at different times due to many different factors — and Chattanooga’s position as a regional hub for business on the border of three states, it becomes increasingly difficult to suss out the impact of individual mitigation measures as time goes on.

Despite these limitations, this view of the data shows some instances where the presence or lack of mitigation policies may have affected transmission rates, as well as some stark differences in how the pandemic has impacted the counties.

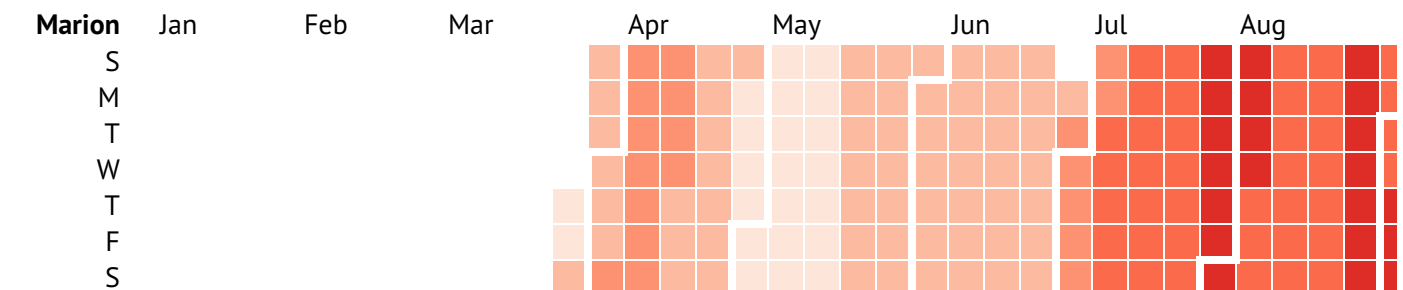
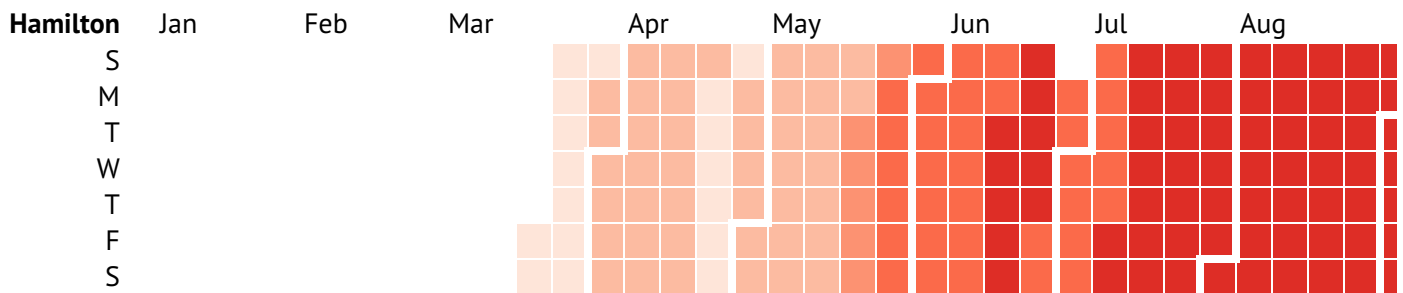
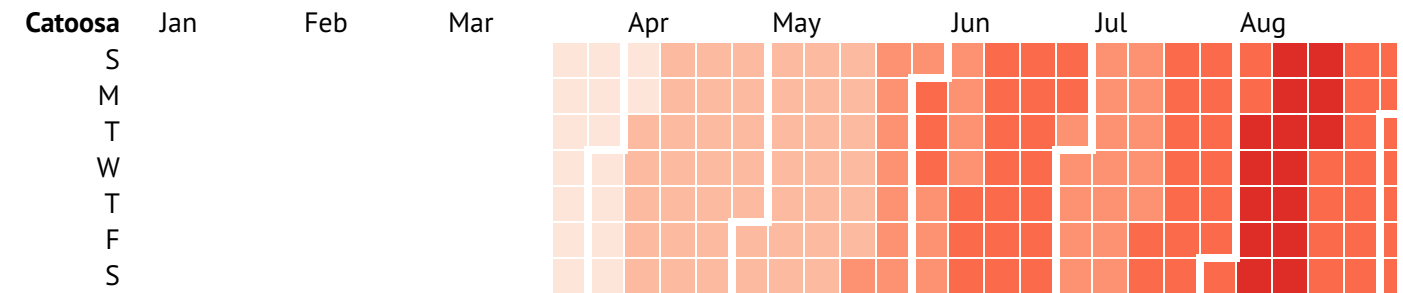
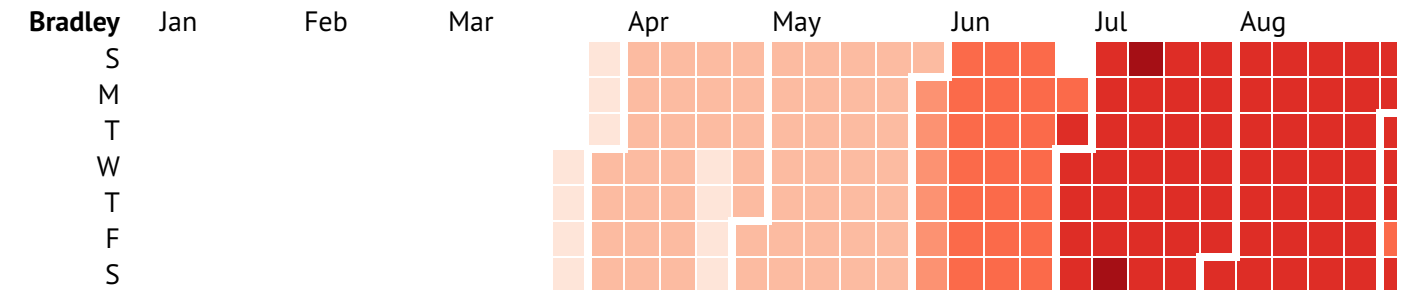
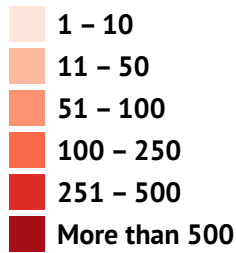
“The initial shelter-in-place [order] seemed to stall the spread a bit, but lifting restrictions too soon without a mask mandate and allowing high-density attendance in public spaces probably escalated spread,” said Greg Heath, an epidemiologist and professor emeritus of public health at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

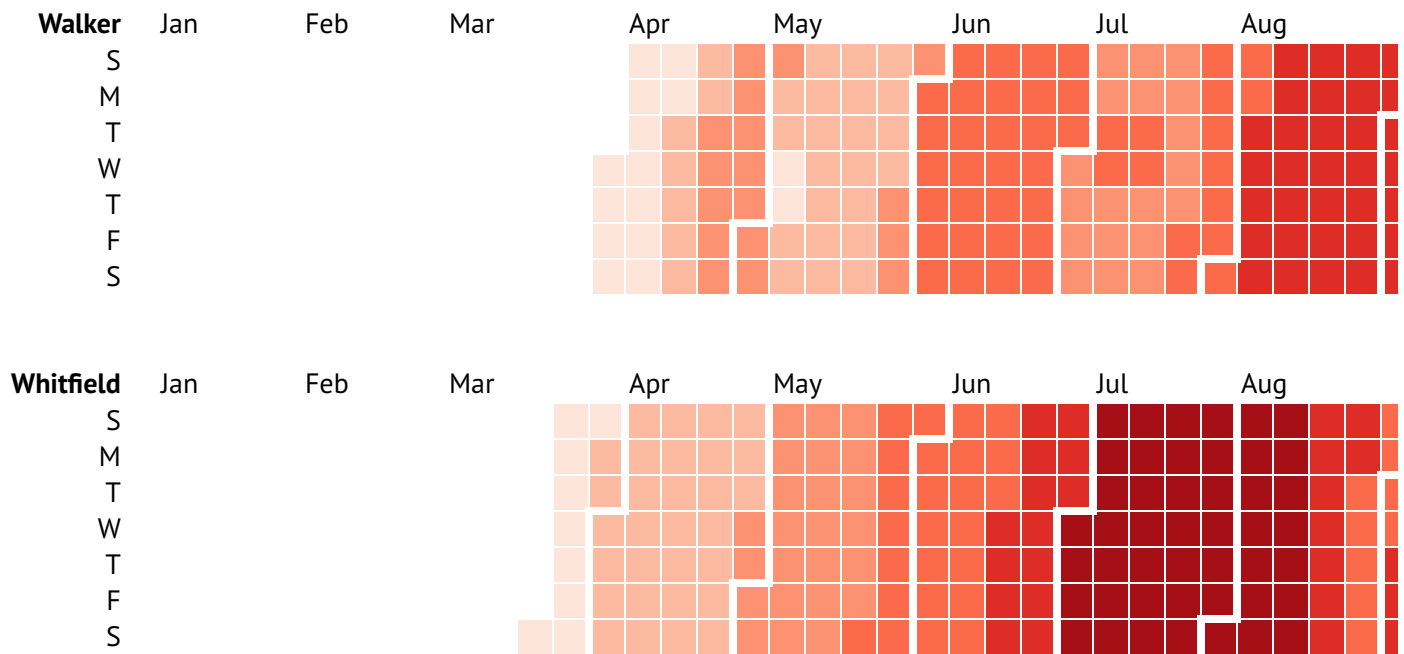
Whitfield County, Georgia, stands out as a place that has been consistently hard-hit by COVID-19 for the size of its population.

In Whitfield County, the cumulative 14-day rate of new cases per 100,000 residents was over 500 for every day in July, November and December, showing how the summer and fall waves of the coronavirus hit the North Georgia county sooner and more aggressively than elsewhere in the region.

Since the nationwide post-Thanksgiving case surge, which makes up the most severe wave yet for all six counties, Bradley County has surpassed the others in its rate of new daily cases.

Heatmap shows the cumulative 14-day rate of new cases per 100,000 residents. Blank values reflect rates less than one or days where reporting agencies published data corrections. Scroll to the right on mobile devices to see subsequent months.





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Data: [Tennessee Department of Health](#) and [Georgia Department of Health](#).
Visualization by [David Morton](#).

Hamilton is the only county in the region with a public face mask requirement, despite strong recommendations from the medical community and the White House COVID-19 Task Force that mask mandates were needed in all counties. In the weeks and months after the mandate took effect in July, the county saw a marked reduction in its rate of new cases and hospitalizations. But that progress was eventually overshadowed by the fall surge, fueled initially by an uptick in rural counties without face mask requirements.

When and how to send students back to school in the fall was another controversial decision that varied widely across districts. Although outbreaks among students and teachers have occurred, in-person learning when proper precautions are in place did not appear to significantly increase community transmission.

(READ MORE: These are the Hamilton County schools affected most, least by COVID-19 closures)

Regional case spikes have typically followed in the weeks after national holidays, such as Memorial Day and July 4. For that reason, health officials warned the worst wave was still to come this fall, as people retreated indoors and convened for the holidays.

As projected, coronavirus cases and hospitalizations across the region increased dramatically after Thanksgiving and show no sign of slowing. Officials say high

community prevalence, COVID-19 fatigue and social gatherings without precautions are the main factors contributing to the spread.

Rae Bond, chair of the area's COVID-19 Joint Task Force, said on Tuesday that hospitals are strained but managing. But another larger, post-Christmas surge could be overwhelming.

"We need to be able to send people to the hospital if they're having a heart attack or if they're having a stroke or if they need an urgent surgery, and the best way for us to be able to do that is for all of us to take the steps to be safe right now," Bond said during a news conference.

(READ MORE: Chattanooga area hospitals warned of looming COVID-19 crisis. Now their fears are coming true.)

As with most health statistics, COVID-19 data comes in different forms and is not always complete. However, when used in combination with other key metrics, it helps form a piece of a puzzle that creates a clearer picture of the pandemic's trajectory.

Confirmed case data is one of the most readily available and important metrics to understanding COVID-19, but it's most likely an underestimate of the actual burden of disease. That's because many people with coronavirus never get tested and access to free, convenient testing is not always readily available. Therefore, officials also rely on hospitalization and mortality data to inform decisions.

Since most people who contract the coronavirus don't require hospital care, a rise in hospitalizations is another indication of increased community spread. This data also has limitations, though, in that the number of hospitalized COVID-19 patients represents only the most severe cases of infection. Hospital patients were often exposed to the virus several weeks before admission, so it's a delayed metric for tracking transmission. It also omits important patient characteristics and isn't always reported at the county level.

COVID-19 mortality data reflect the state of the outbreak several weeks prior, because it can take several weeks or more than a month for someone to succumb to the disease. Frequent lags in reporting make it even harder to draw meaningful, real-time conclusions about an outbreak.

However, Heath said that a few things are clear based on what's happened in the United States and across the globe:

- There is considerable variability in spread, cases, hospitalizations and deaths from place to place.
- Complete shutdowns are probably not necessary if compliance with mitigation behaviors is quite high (70-100%) — masking, spatial distancing,

hand washing and limiting exposure to people who are outside your household.

- Vaccination of at least 70%-80% of a population should provide adequate “herd immunity” to the extent that the virus has nowhere else to go to infect.
- Mitigation efforts must remain in full compliance throughout the deployment of the vaccine in order to stave off preventable hospitalizations and deaths.

Dr. Pablo Perez, an internal medicine physician in Whitfield County, has seen the devastating effects of COVID-19 on its citizens firsthand.

“These numbers are real,” Perez said. “The numbers are not just numbers — they’re people. They’re fathers, they’re daughters, they’re sons. The virus is not just killing elderly people, it’s killing young people and leaving some young kids without parents.”

Perez is no stranger to suffering. He has completed medical mission trips to poor countries throughout his career and treated people with horrible diseases. Until COVID-19 emerged, that kind of suffering was rare in the United States, he said.

“Here, people didn’t think that would happen to them,” he said.

Perez fears that the local outbreak will only worsen until vaccines become widely available and accepted, because local officials are not implementing mitigation measures — such as face mask mandates — or acknowledging the severity of the pandemic.

“Our officials are ignoring science,” he said. “I don’t know what type of message they want to transmit to the community, but if they keep sending the same message, which is silence, we’re going to be suffering.”

Contact Elizabeth Fite at efite@timesfreepress.com or follow her on Twitter @ecfite.

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How Whitfield County became one of Georgia's worst COVID-19 hot spots

December 27, 2020 by Elizabeth Fite | Updated December 28, 2020 at 7:05

p.m.



This is the second story in a three-part series. [Read the rest of the series here.](#)

DALTON, Ga. - Stoney Ponders took notice when news broke in March that a funeral nearly 300 miles to the South in Albany, Georgia, sparked what would become one of the nation's first and most noteworthy COVID-19 clusters.

He said that's how he and his staff at Ponders Funeral Home, which he founded in Dalton 28 years ago, knew early on the dangers of congregating together as long as the coronavirus is circulating.

As the pandemic progressed and COVID-19 spread across the region, so did the demand for funeral services. Though funerals in 2020 look a bit different than years past - more outside services, fewer guests, people donning face masks – Ponders said it's important to find ways to safely conduct services so that families and friends can mourn the loss of their loved ones.

"Grief that's shared is grief that's lessened, and when you're grieving and dying alone, it's horrible," he said. "That's the tragedy of COVID. Our loved ones are dying alone."

Then in August, as the coronavirus reached its summer peak in Whitfield County, Ponders said he found out how real that tragedy was.

George Cross, one of Ponders' longest-standing and most-loyal employees, contracted COVID-19.

"We experienced it right here. George got tested on Wednesday, his results came back Friday and he died the next day," Ponders said. "That was very scary for us. I just think people should know it is very real people, and people are dying every day from it."



Staff Photo by Matt Hamilton / Owner of Ponders Funeral Home, Stoney Ponders, left, and funeral director Jason Gibson, right, stand with the portrait of their friend and co-worker George Cross on Monday, Dec. 14, 2020 in Dalton, Ga.

But getting that message to resonate with people hasn't been easy, especially in Whitfield County.

"For some reason, it's become a political issue. I've said it's almost as if they're denying that it's actually real," Ponders said. "I've heard countless numbers of people who would say, 'Oh, when the election's over the COVID will go away.' Since the election, it's quadrupled."

Jason Gibson, Ponders' nephew and funeral director, said that usually it's the people whose families haven't been affected by COVID-19 who don't think it's a big issue.

"We make it mandatory that people wear a mask to come into the building, and you would not believe the people griping about that. It's scary that people don't take it seriously," Gibson said.

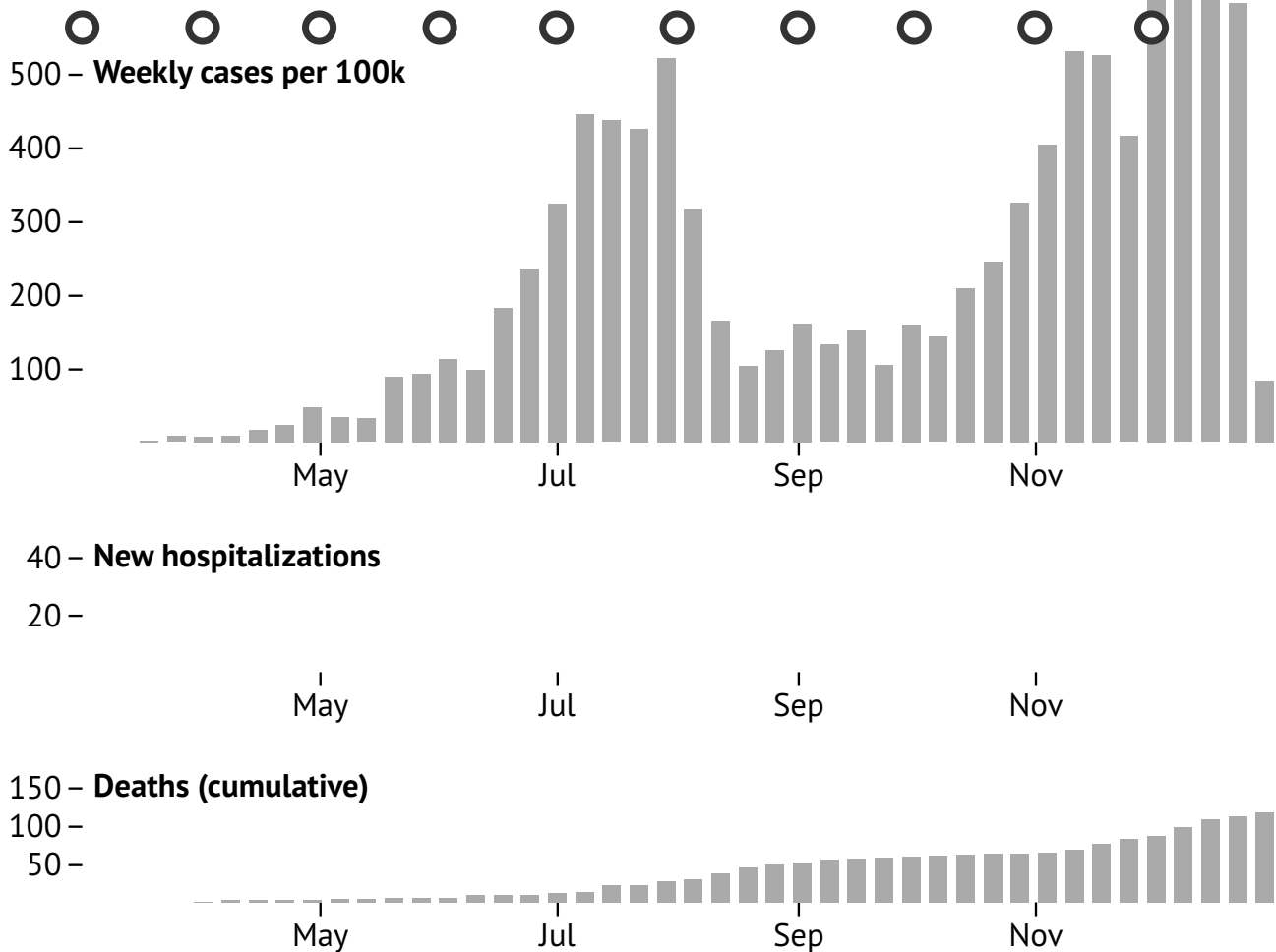
Whitfield County is not unique in that many of its residents reject policies meant to control the spread of COVID-19, such as face mask mandates. Similar stories can be found across the Chattanooga region.

But what sets Whitfield County apart from other counties are the social, economic and environmental factors that make it especially vulnerable to COVID-19.

Select county

Whitfield ▼

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Daily hospitalization data for Georgia counties is unavailable.

Shivani Patel, a social epidemiologist at Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health, said that although large, publicly available data sets are useful, they only provide a small piece of the COVID-19 puzzle. For example, counties with large high-risk populations - such as older adults, people with chronic

disease, minorities, low-income individuals, essential workers and those living in close quarters - tend to be disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

That's why Emory created a "COVID-19 Health Equity Interactive Dashboard" to add context and help policymakers determine which counties are high risk by assigning them a "vulnerability score" based on factors such as poverty level and population density.

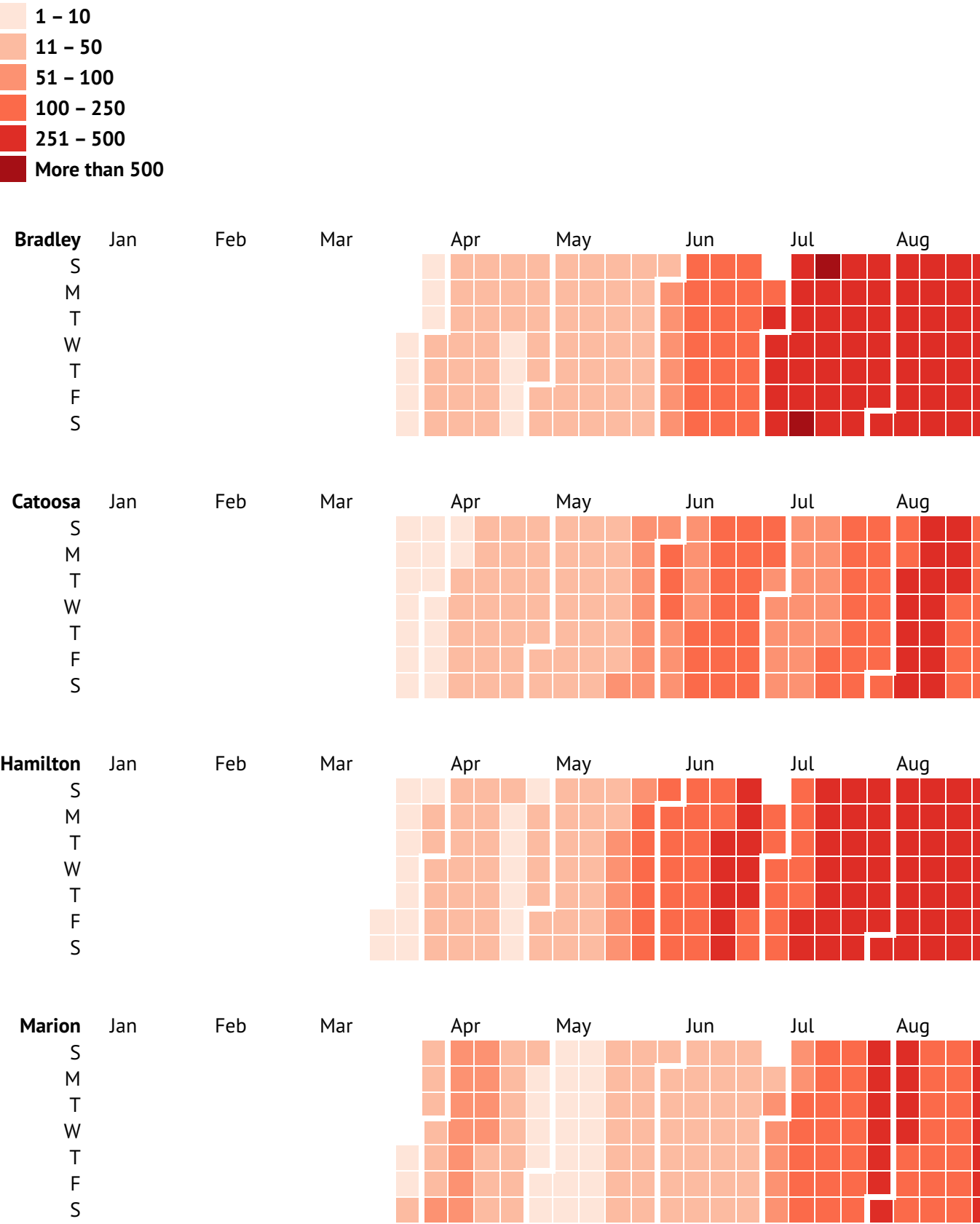
Patel said Whitfield County "sticks out like a sore thumb" as a county that's both high risk and heavily impacted by COVID-19, according to Emory's analysis.

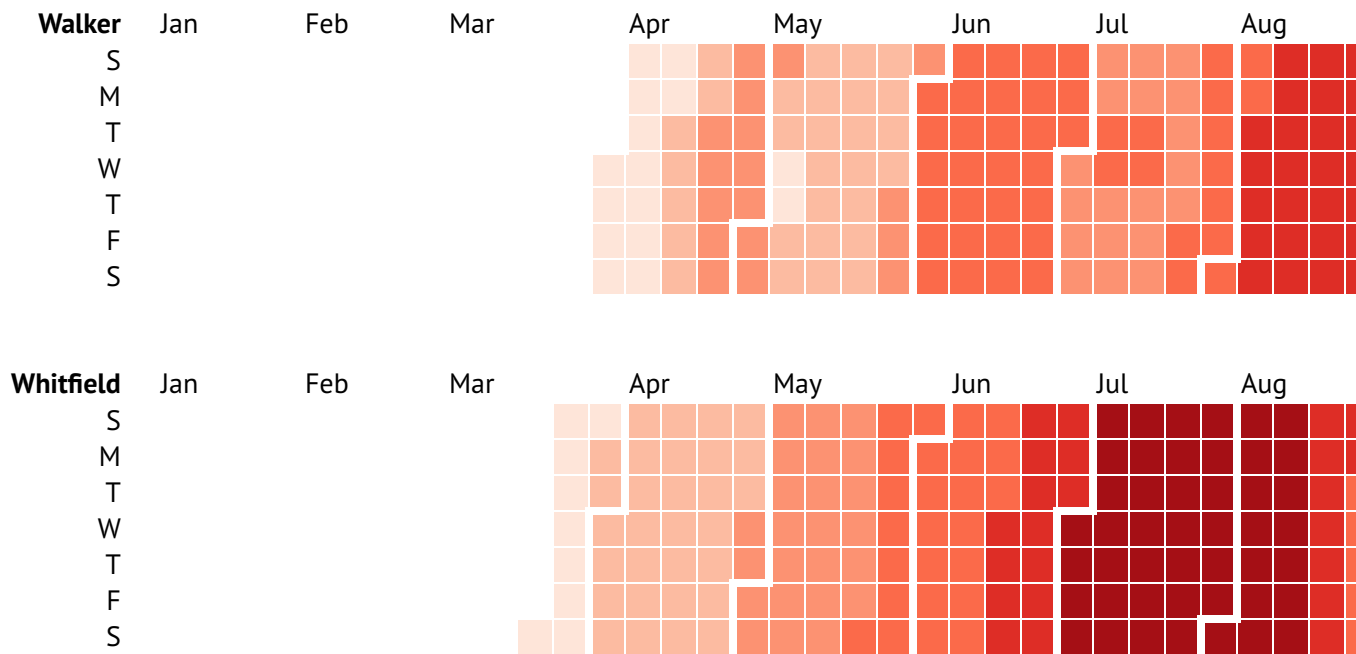
"When I looked at this, I said, 'Wow.' This is the portrait of a county in terms of the vulnerability score is high, cases are high and deaths are high," she said. "It's not just a county that's been hit by the second wave, if you will, but it is hard hit throughout."

Patel said the characteristics that stand out about Whitfield County are its large Hispanic community, densely populated living conditions, high percent of residents without health insurance, above-average poverty levels and lack of public transportation.

"It ranks as highly vulnerable," she said. "We should have seen this coming."

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Known as the "Carpet Capital of the World," Whitfield County's large manufacturing industry has for decades been a hub for immigrant workers, hailing primarily from Mexico and other Latin American countries. The Hispanic community makes up about 34.5% of Whitfield County's population - significantly higher than the statewide rate of 9.4%.

Race and ethnicity place certain groups at higher risk for COVID-19 infection and death, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In the United States, Hispanic or Latino residents are 1.7 times more likely to contract COVID-19, 4.1 times more likely to be hospitalized and 2.8 times more likely to die due to the coronavirus than non-Hispanic white people, according to the CDC.

Health care providers, advocates and community leaders in Whitfield County knew these grim statistics and began working on a plan to provide outreach to the Latino community.

Heather Donahue - executive director at the DEO Clinic, a primary care clinic in Dalton that provides health care services to people without health insurance - said local officials in August approached the group about partnering to provide more outreach and COVID-19 testing. As the group began to aggressively promote safety measures throughout the Latino community, they realized how many people were unaware of the danger and how to protect themselves.

"There were a fair number of people that still just had very little understanding of COVID," Donahue said, adding that people were terrified of the disease. "I think people were avoiding testing because they were in denial and then they would wait so long to go to the hospital that the outcome was poorer."

Teresa Mendez, a well-known community health worker and DEO Clinic employee, said one of the key problems the group identified was the location of the health department, which at the time was the only place in town to offer free COVID-19 testing. The health department sits atop a hill and requires that people drive past the sheriff's office and be greeted by military personnel.

"That was the most discouraging part of this whole testing, especially for the Hispanic community. Nobody's going to make an appointment to get tested, then pass by the police," Mendez said.

Using funding from the city and tests from the North Georgia Health District, the DEO Clinic was able to offer free, drive-thru testing to anyone with or without health insurance at its location in the middle of the city. Unlike testing at the health department - which conducts the vast majority of free testing in the county - no appointment is needed and weekday hours are from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. to better accommodate work schedules.

While the effort has greatly improved the rate of COVID-19 cases among the Hispanic community, for many help came too late.

Photo Gallery

Whitfield County as COVID hotspot



Dr. Pablo Perez, an internal medicine physician in Dalton and an advocate, said that culture, work ethic and lack of information helped COVID-19 spread rapidly through the Hispanic community. For example, families are tight-knit and grandparents are rarely seen in nursing homes because in the Latino culture, it's morally wrong not to look after one's elders. Multigenerational homes create a prime environment for COVID-19 to spread, since younger household members may not show symptoms and unknowingly transmit the virus to older adults.

Many Latinos work in essential services such as construction, factories, meat processing plants or in the harvesting of crops - jobs that never shut down and don't have a work-from-home option.

Ash McEuen, head pastor at Trinity United Methodist Church in Dalton, said that a large portion of Whitfield County's Hispanic residents are "living in the shadows." Now, many of those same people are grappling with the pandemic alone.

"There is so much that is hidden. The virus we can't see, but we can't see so many of the effects of the virus, either," he said. "We know that people are struggling and trying to live and survive, but most of us don't take the time to talk to those people and know who they are."

McEuen's church operates a food pantry, which fed about 75 people in January. But since COVID-19 hit, there have been months in which more than 300 people came through needing assistance.

"Our food pantry every month is literally completely empty, and there's people coming from all walks of life," McEuen said. "Some of the criticisms we've gotten are, 'those people don't need food, look at the car they're driving.' We can't judge on that, because this pandemic hit everybody in different ways."

He knows a family now living in an extended-stay hotel - a common problem due to lack of affordable housing in Dalton - after losing their home. Although the father has a job, it doesn't pay well enough to support the whole family. The mother wants to work but is homeschooling the children instead.

"They're afraid of the virus because of family members that have underlying conditions," he said. "It's that kind of vicious cycle that's really, really hurting people, and they don't know the best way to move forward."

There are also many barriers that prevent people from accessing help or information about the pandemic. Aside from not always speaking English, McEuen said he quickly realized when the church moved to online services early in the pandemic that a number of people don't have internet in their homes or on their smartphones.

Dr. Perez said the group has worked hard to help people, but the effort hasn't had the impact that he hoped. He blames some community leaders and politicians for spreading misinformation and downplaying the pandemic.

"I'm incredibly sad and frustrated as a health care provider that in our community people didn't get the right message. Still they are in denial. They have the wrong message - that this is like the flu, that with this virus we don't have to use masks," Perez said. "It seems like there's a total disconnect for so many people."

At the funeral home, Ponders keeps a picture of Cross, his longtime employee, on display in the lobby to honor his friend and serve as a reminder to others that COVID-19 is not to be taken lightly. Ponders contracted COVID-19 after Cross and wasn't able to attend the funeral. Although he was fairly sick for about 10 days, Ponders said he's grateful to have made a full recovery. He remembers Cross, who was 73 years old when he died, as an instrumental member of his community and the person who was the first to show up and last to leave work every day.

Coronavirus deaths in Whitfield County have more than doubled since Cross died. Ponders said December has been the busiest month yet for funerals.

"Since it's gotten colder, it seems to be like pouring gas on fire," he said. "It's just now peaking. I mean, I don't even know if we've reached the peak. That's what's so scary."

Ponders thinks that until people can find a way to look past the politics and focus on protecting each other, more innocent people are going to die.

"That's my opinion," he said. "Trust me, the virus is apolitical, and if you are in a group of people, you need to be very, very careful, socially distanced and everything, and the least thing you could do is wear a mask."

Contact Elizabeth Fite at efite@timesfreepress.com or follow her on Twitter [@ecfite](https://twitter.com/ecfite).

What questions do you still have about the COVID-19 pandemic in the

Elizabeth Fite

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Elizabeth Fite was the healthcare reporter for the Chattanooga Times Free Press. She covers rural healthcare, hospitals, health insurance, public health and health policy, with a focus on explaining and investigating how healthcare systems and safety-net programs work — or don't — for the people who depend on them. She joined the paper in 2017 after earning a master's degree in Health and Medical Journalism from the University of Georgia.

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Dalton, Georgia, planned for progress, not a pandemic

December 28, 2020 by [Elizabeth Fite](#) , [Patrick Filbin](#) | Updated December

29, 2020 at 12:55 p.m.



0 Comments



This is the third story in a three-part series. [Read the rest of the series here.](#)

On Nov. 9 - a week before Whitfield County topped the state of Georgia in new COVID-19 cases per capita - Dr. Pablo Perez presented his case for a face mask mandate to the county commission.

Perez, an internal medicine physician in Dalton, Georgia, who has advocated for stronger steps to curb the pandemic, said he felt a moral obligation to express his concern.

At the time, Whitfield County Commissioner Roger Crossen was sick with COVID-19 and fighting for his life in the intensive care unit. Commissioner Barry Robbins also was COVID-19 positive and isolating at home without symptoms.

"I was very optimistic and presenting just simple research about how much we can decrease the transmission if there is a mandate," Perez said.

He wound up leaving that meeting stunned and heartbroken.

Not only did the commission not consider a face mask mandate, the group voted against even recommending that people wear masks to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

"It's like they just closed their eyes and they said, 'Well, we'll just do what we're doing. We're doing fine,' and we're not doing fine," Perez said. "For me, it's difficult to understand. Do they not care about our community, or are they very indifferent to the pain and suffering of others?"



Staff File Photo by Robin Rudd / Dr. Pablo Perez, an internal medicine physician in Dalton, Georgia, speaks during a news conference on July 2, while Gov. Brian Kemp, far right, listens. Kemp visited Dalton urging people to wear face masks as part of a statewide tour to COVID-19 hot spots.

In all likelihood, the coronavirus pandemic will cement its place in history as one of the 21st century's worst crises. But another crisis still hangs heavy on the minds of Whitfield County residents.

Home to a \$10 billion textile manufacturing industry, Dalton is known as the "Carpet Capital of the World." Whitfield County, home of about 105,000 people, enjoyed a long period of economic success as carpet became a popular feature in suburban homes after World War II. Then came the Great Recession of 2008.

"Dalton was hit harder than just about any community in the country," said Rob Bradham, president and CEO of the Greater Dalton Chamber of

Commerce. "Our major products - floor covering products - are very tied to the home-building market, and that recession was caused in large measure by a housing crisis. Nobody was buying our products, because nobody was building houses."

When Bradham became head of the chamber in 2015, he went on what he calls "a listening tour" of meetings to learn what business owners and citizens envisioned for the city.

"I heard over and over again in these meetings that Dalton was great pre-recession, our economy was booming, then we had this devastating recession," he said. "And then, 'Now I can see the light at the end of the tunnel, my business is coming back, things are looking better. What's the future? Who's got a plan?'"

In 2018, the chamber began leading a new strategic initiative for the community called "Believe Greater Dalton" focused on downtown and economic revitalization. Features including building new parks, housing and encouraging entrepreneurship.

"Downtown is night and day different today than it was five years ago," Bradham said. "And that's not just our efforts. It's the efforts of a lot of different partners that have been working together to make that happen."



Staff Photo by Matt Hamilton / Patrons enjoy beer and each others company outside the Dalton Brewing Co. on Friday, Dec. 11, 2020 in Dalton, Ga.

Local restaurateur T.J. Kaikobad moved to Dalton 30 years ago and has watched the city transform from streets lined with empty and dilapidated storefronts to a bustling downtown filled with high-end apartments, new restaurants and a brewery.

"Today, you're going to be hard pressed to find a spot downtown. It's literally exploded," Kaikobad said.

But just as the city was on the rise, a novel coronavirus arrived and began threatening Dalton's progress.

In early July, Gov. Brian Kemp visited Dalton as part of a statewide tour urging people to wear masks in public and reminding them the coronavirus pandemic

was far from over.

By late fall, the Georgia Department of Public Health released data showing per capita COVID-19 cases in Whitfield County were the worst in the state.

"That's not a record you want to set," Bradham said, noting that the chamber has worked hard to promote face masks, social distancing and hand hygiene, but there's only so much they can do.

"I'll just be frank. We're a fairly conservative community, and we've got a lot of people here that just don't like to be told they have to wear a mask," he said.

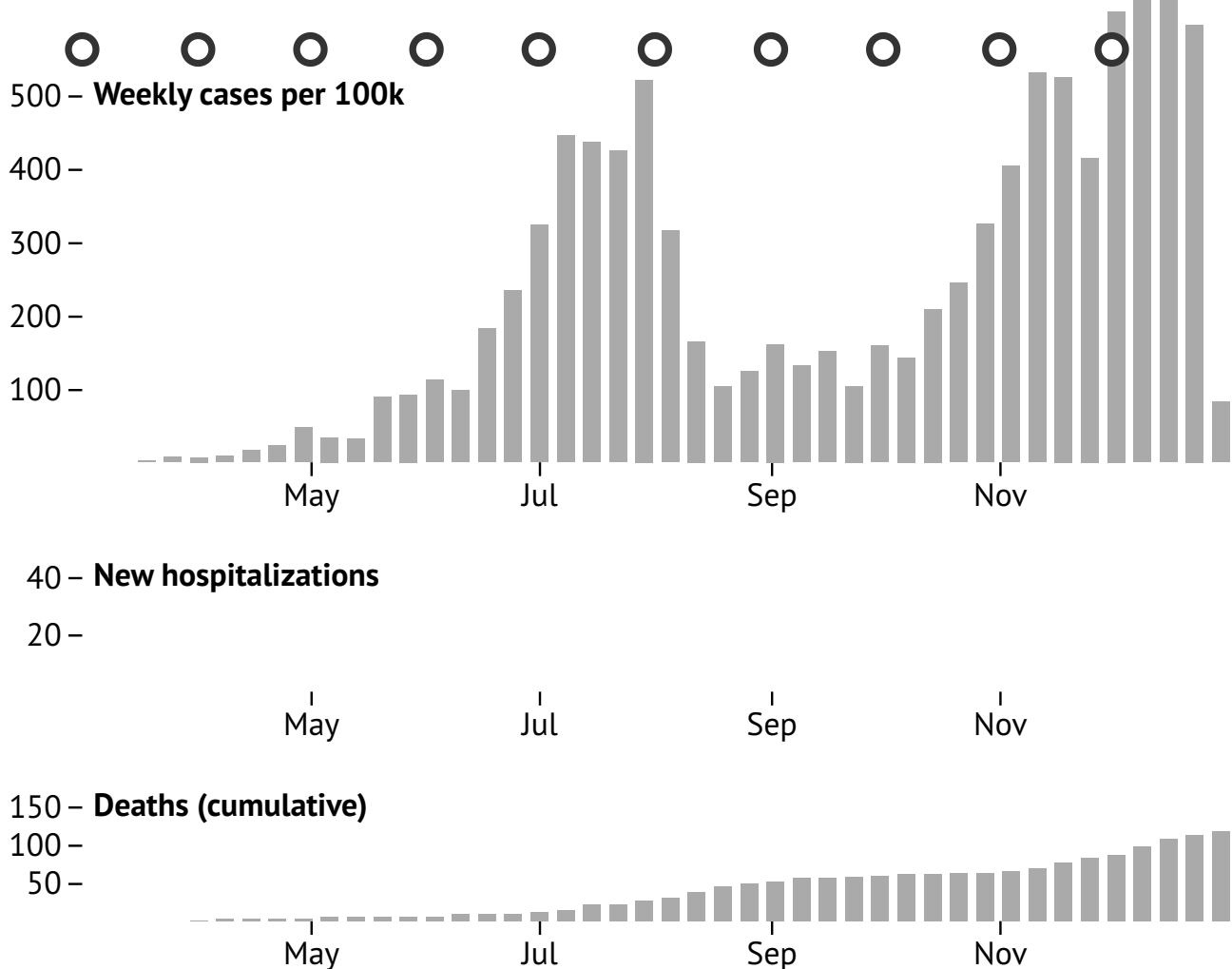
Although COVID-19 has brought challenges - like the departures of three key staff members during the initial shutdown - Kaikobad is confident that Dalton and his restaurants will weather the pandemic. So much so that he's planning to open two new restaurants in the coming year.

"I have much stronger faith in Georgia and its administration than if I was in California - not a doubt in my mind that those guys are going overboard," Kaikobad said.

Select county

Whitfield ▼

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Daily hospitalization data for Georgia counties is unavailable.

The latest fall surge is different from the summer, when cases, hospitalizations and deaths were largely concentrated in the Hispanic community.

In July, most of Whitfield County's COVID-19 clusters were concentrated in textile factories. As of November, the trend of new clusters had shifted to

schools, according to data from the North Georgia Health District obtained through an open records request.

Whitfield County Schools' fall reopening plan was the most cautious of any district in Northwest Georgia in that high schoolers started by attending in-person two days a week and learning online the rest of the week.

Face masks have never been required on campuses, although Dalton Public Schools do require masks.

Sherry Gregory, North Georgia Health District infectious disease director, said via email that COVID fatigue, quarantine compliance, incorrect and lack of mask wearing and not social distancing have played a major role in increased transmission.

"It can be much more difficult to require children and teenagers to adopt these mitigation strategies, especially when the adults are not providing an example of proper mitigation," Gregory said.

Whitfield County Commission Chair Lynn Laughter has long been an advocate for implementing a mask mandate in Whitfield County but has struggled to get her fellow commissioners on board. November's meeting marked the third time the group had rejected face coverings in a public meeting since the pandemic began.

Eight days later, Crossen died of the virus.



_Photo contributed by Whitfield County government / Roger

Crossen

Chris Crossen, Roger's son and Dalton's assistant police chief, said his dad actually started to get better when he was in intensive care.

"He got pneumonia and as they increased his oxygen levels he started to really improve, his lungs started to respond," Chris Crossen said. "But his heart became an issue. It all just became more than he could overcome."

Crossen was in good shape. He was a basketball and football official for 30 years and didn't have any preexisting conditions that would have made him more susceptible to the virus.

Several fellow commissioners told the Times Free Press that there's nothing more they can do to slow the pandemic.

"It's just a bad virus," Whitfield County Commissioner Greg Jones said.

Commissioner Harold Brooker echoed Jones' sentiments.

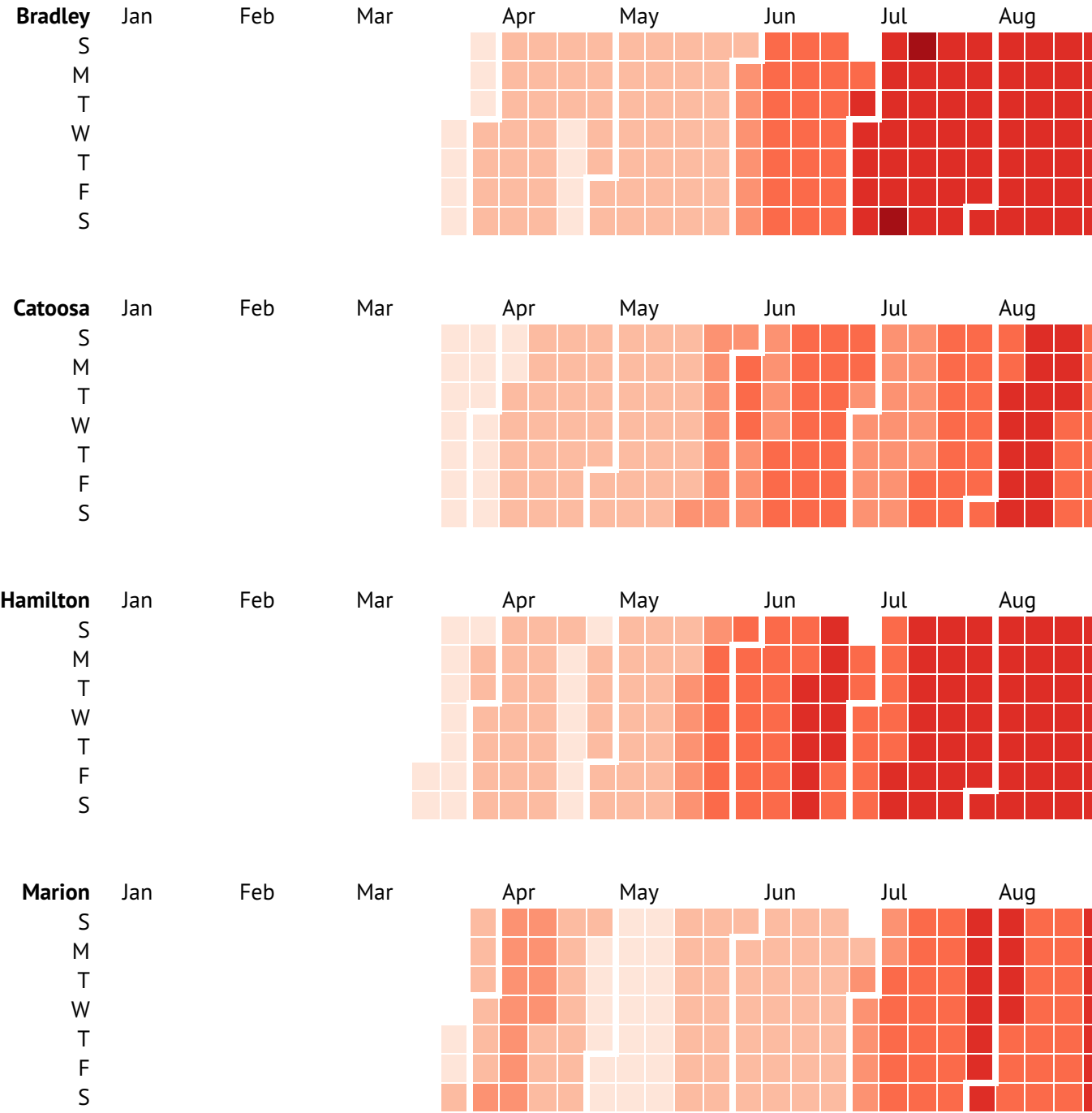
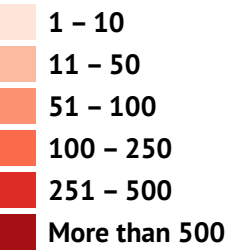
"I don't see how the federal government can slow this down. Hopefully, the vaccine works and that will slow the spread, and until then I pray it gets over with," Brooker said.

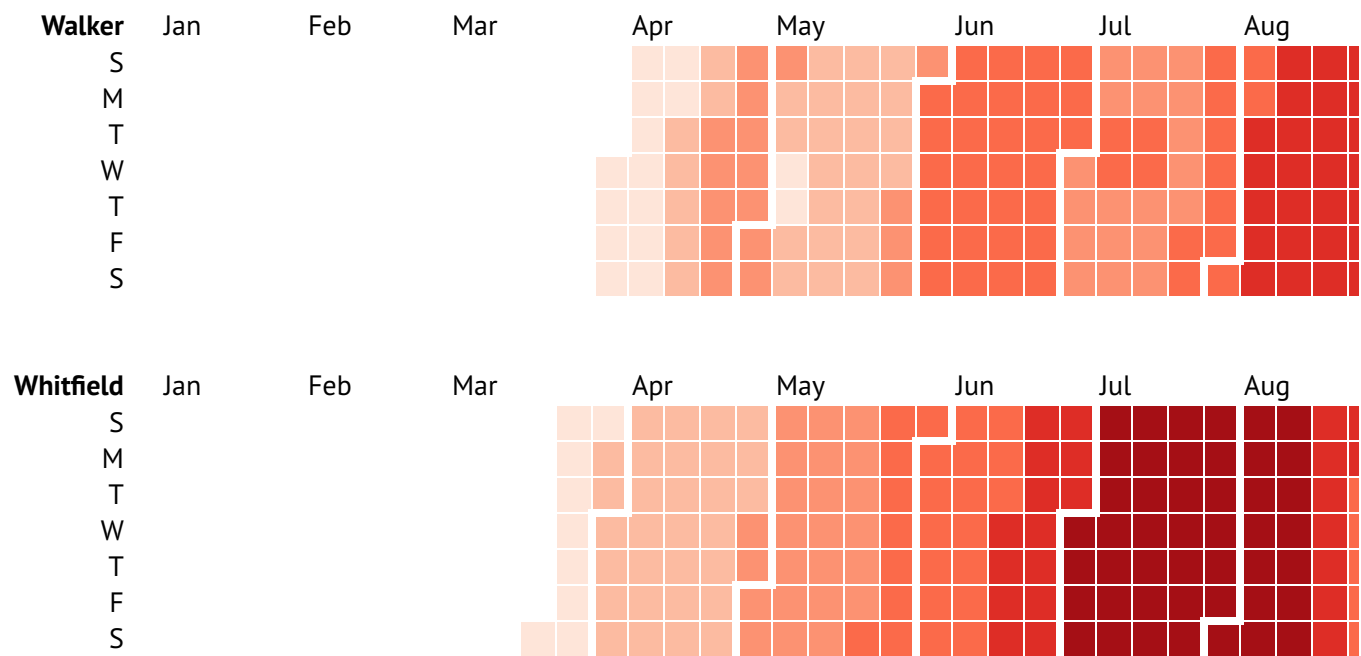
Meanwhile, Dr. Zachary Taylor, director of the Georgia Department of Public Health district that encompasses Whitfield County, said the reasons why the county's outbreak is spreading uncontrolled are clear.

"People continue to gather in small groups outside their immediate households and do not wear masks or practice social distancing," Taylor said via email, adding that the department has conducted "extensive media campaigns" in an attempt to inform residents about the steps they need to take to prevent spreading the virus - isolate infected people, quarantine their contacts, wear a mask in public, don't gather with non-household members, practice social distancing and continue good hand hygiene.

"Until we have a sufficient supply of vaccine and are able to vaccinate a significant majority of the population, these are the only things that can be done," Taylor said. "Public health is doing everything we can do, however, the spread will not be contained until the community takes the steps outlined above."

Heatmap shows the cumulative 14-day rate of new cases per 100,000 residents. Blank values reflect rates less than one or days where reporting agencies published data corrections. Scroll to the right on mobile devices to see subsequent months.





Heatmap shows the cumulative 14-day rate of new cases per 100,000 residents. Blank values reflect rates less than one or days where reporting agencies published data corrections.

Data: [Tennessee Department of Health](#) and [Georgia Department of Health](#).
 Visualization by [David Morton](#).

County Commissioner Jones, a real estate agent and poultry farm owner who studied auto body mechanics at Dalton College in the 1980s, said he rarely wears a face mask because he doesn't think they are "that effective."

"I don't think they stop the virus," he said. "They may stop, you know, if you're sneezing, stop you from blowing saliva out. I may be totally wrong, but those are my thoughts."

Still, in the weeks since Crossen's death, the county commission has changed its tune slightly.

On Dec. 14, commissioners passed a resolution recommending people wear masks. Brooker was the one who made the motion, and this time around, both Jones and Robbins voted yes.

Jones said later a driving factor in his decision was his worries the local hospitals would fill up and not be able to serve the community. The commission also voted to extend its own mandate that visitors must wear masks when in county-owned buildings.

Laughter's time as commission chair will come to an end in January as the county deals with the worst COVID-19 outbreak in the state. Jevin Jensen, who will be the new commission chair, hesitated on whether he would be in favor of a mask mandate.

"I want to recommend it, I want everyone to follow all of the guidelines, and I try to lead by example," he said. "That's all I can do as far as that's concerned."

Jensen and Brooker pointed to the heavy manufacturing industry in Dalton as a driving force behind community spread, although Bradham said that's a

misconception.

"That's just not the case. For the most part, our industry, if you were to walk into a carpet mill or floor covering manufacturing facility, it's naturally socially distanced. A tufting machine only requires one operator, and they're 10 feet apart," Bradham said. "We're seeing community spread. So it's basically friends and family getting together in settings where they shouldn't, outside of the work environment."

Jensen is looking forward to the vaccine getting to Whitfield County by January for health care workers and the most vulnerable. Then, he said, come February, March and April, the county needs to have "almost like a military operation" for distributing vaccines to as many people as possible.

Dalton's mayor, David Pennington, said the only way a mask mandate would be effective is if Kemp issued a mandate that businesses couldn't opt out of. As it's written now, businesses have the choice to not require people to wear masks in their stores.

Pennington also believed policing a mask mandate in the city limits would be a logistical nightmare.

"I'm glad the vaccine is being rolled out," he said. "That's the only thing that's going to stop it."

Pennington mentioned the \$50,000 the city agreed to give the DEO Clinic in Dalton for an increase in testing accessibility and COVID-19 education outreach as ways the city has helped try to slow the spread of the virus. Beyond that, he said, there isn't much more the city could have done.



When Chris Crossen looks back on the last nine months, he has a hard time putting into words why Whitfield County has had such a hard time containing the virus.

"I think it really comes down to being an adult," he said. "If a business posts on their door asking you to wear masks, they have the right to do that and you should respect that. If people put their politics aside, I think we'd be a lot better off."

As for Dr. Perez, the reasons behind Whitfield County's COVID-19 crisis are clear.

"Things are getting worse because of the lack of communication among the local authorities and the lack of empathy with the suffering of others," he said. "I don't see the solidarity that should be in these difficult times. I don't see much compassion from people to want to take a pause and do something for our community."

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