

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

www.nganews.com

Legal Organ of Union County

Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1909

March 9, 2016

Gowder fired, Kelley hired as CEO at UGH

By Charles Duncan
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Lewis Kelley has been named CEO of Union General Hospital, Patsy Efrid, board chair of Union General Inc. said on Friday.

The hiring of Kelley on Friday, March 4, by the Union General Inc. Board of Directors resulted in the termination of CEO Mike Gowder following his indictment and subsequent arrest for drug trafficking in North Carolina, according to Efrid.

"You can't have two CEOs," Efrid said. "Mike Gowder was still CEO, while Lewis Kelley was the interim CEO."

"Lewis Kelley is now the CEO of Union General Hospital, not the interim CEO,"

Efrid said. "Painfully, we had to move on."

Kelley has most recently served as interim CEO, and previously as administrator at Chatuge Regional Hospital, and has more than two decades of experience in the Union General/Chatuge health care system.

Kelley, working closely with the leadership and board of Union General Inc., has been in charge of operations of both hospitals and all related medical facilities since Feb. 5, the day following the arrest of then hospital CEO Mike Gowder.

Kelley's focus has been maintaining business as usual, communicating with hospital employees and the community, and assuring the high quality of care standards.

"We are pleased to have Lewis' steady hands on the wheel, as well as his deep knowledge of our facilities, this community and region," said Efrid.

"Our primary responsibility as stewards of this hospital and its related facilities are to ensure continuing operations, and maintain the high quality of care," Board Vice Chair Jim Williams said.

Gowder was placed on paid administrative leave by the Union General Inc. board at the time of his arrest on drug charges in Union County in early February.

Dr. James Heaton, then a member of the Union General Inc. Board of Directors, was suspended from that board at the time of his arrest on drug charges in Union County in



Lewis Kelley, CEO

early February.

Gowder was charged in Union County with three counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance, and one count of conspiracy; Heaton was charged with 40 counts

of unauthorized distribution and dispensation of controlled substances, and one count of conspiracy.

Dr. Heaton, also indicted in North Carolina for drug trafficking, no longer is affiliated with the Union General medical staff, and no longer is a member of the Union General Hospital Inc. Board of Directors, Efrid said.

Furthermore, Dr. David Gowder, a former board member at Union General Hospital, is no longer associated with the Union General medical staff, Efrid said.

Dr. David Gowder also was arrested in Union County on Feb. 4 on 36 counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance, and seven counts of unauthorized

distribution and dispensation of controlled substances, Union County Jail records show.

Last year's April arrest of Dr. David Gowder in Blue Ridge for fraudulently obtaining prescription drugs sparked an investigation by the Union County Sheriff's Office, which led to the involvement of the United States Drug Enforcement Administration, as well as law enforcement agencies in three states, including Georgia, according to the Union County Sheriff's Office.

This investigation led to the arrests of both Mike and David Gowder, Dr. James Heaton, as well as three additional members of the Gowder family in Union County.

Gowder and Heaton indicted, arrested in North Carolina

By Charles Duncan
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Murphy, NC - Former Union General Hospital CEO Mike Gowder and former Blairsville physician Dr. James Heaton have been indicted by a Cherokee County, NC, grand jury, both for five counts of trafficking in Opium or Heroin, and five counts of obtaining a controlled substance by forgery, according to Cherokee County, NC, Sheriff Derrick Palmer.

Gowder and Dr. Heaton were arrested Wednesday, March 2, Sheriff Palmer said.

Gowder is free on \$500,000 bond; Dr. Heaton was still in custody (at press

time), his bond set at \$500,000 also, Sheriff Palmer said.

Both are required to appear at an April 4th Superior Court hearing in Cherokee County, NC, Superior Court, Sheriff Palmer said.

Gowder was placed on paid administrative leave at the time of his arrest in early February by the Union General Inc. Board of Directors, and his employment was terminated a month to the day later on March 4. Heaton, a member of the board of directors at the time of his Union County arrest, was suspended from that board.

Both now are no longer associated with Union General

Hospital in any capacity.

The board hired Lewis Kelley as the CEO of both Union General Hospital and Chatuge Regional Hospital, said Board Chair Patsy Efrid.

Gowder was charged in Union County with three counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance, one count of conspiracy; Dr. Heaton was charged with 40 counts of unauthorized distribution and dispensation of controlled substances, one count of conspiracy.

Also charged in Union County, Mike Gowder's brother David Gowder, on 36 counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance, seven

counts of unauthorized distribution and dispensation of controlled substances; his wife Gail Gowder, two counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance; his niece, Jamie Harkins, two counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance, one count of conspiracy; his sister, Virginia Harkins, on two counts of fraudulently obtaining a controlled substance, one count of conspiracy.

Sheriff Palmer wanted to thank the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigations Drug Division Unit, the Union County Sheriff's Office, and the United States Drug Enforcement Administration



Mike Gowder

for partnering with the Cherokee County, NC, Sheriff's Office on this investigation.

Union County Sheriff Mack Mason said that the



James Heaton

investigation remains ongoing, and that he's proud of being able to partner with so many agencies during the course of this continuing investigation.

Allison to lead Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors has hired Regina Allison as the new chamber president and CEO, following a brief yet extensive search to fill the position.

Set to begin her new role on March 16, Allison will be taking over for Patrick Malone, who assumed the interim post after longtime Chamber President Cindy Williams departed for the Cartersville-Bartow County Chamber of Commerce in January.

The board looked at more than 60 initial candidates before narrowing the selection down and conducting 16

in-person interviews, then following up with four more in-depth interviews.

And such due diligence has paid off in the hire of Allison to serve as the new face of the chamber.

"I am so honored and humbled to have been chosen for this position," said Allison. "I would like to thank the Chamber Board Search Committee for entrusting me in this role. I am grateful for the opportunity to serve our community in this capacity. Our family loves Union County, and we are proud to call this our home."

A long-standing member of the community for going on 19 years, Allison has worked in a variety of business-oriented



Regina Allison

capacities, and has raised her two boys in Blairsville and Union County alongside her husband, House District 8 State

See Allison, Page 2A

Purple Martins love Hedrick's high-flying birdhouses

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Toward the end of February, beginning of March each year, Leonard Hedrick eagerly awaits the return of his beloved Purple Martins.

"When they're flying around the nest, they make the prettiest little sound, they do," said Hedrick. "It seems like they're having the best time, the sounds they make. There's no other sound like that from any other bird."

For more than a decade, Hedrick has supplied housing for the little birds, which are particular about where they make their nests. And for more

than a decade, generation after generation of martins have returned home to roost.

"Once they start coming, they will come every year from there on," said Hedrick, who

loves to sit outside and watch the cheerful-sounding birds as they arrive for breeding season.

Hedrick has spent

See Hedrick, Page 2A



Leonard Hedrick with his custom built birdhouses that have housed more than 10 generations of martins

Bob Head Street opens off 515 March 18

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The City of Blairsville is set to open Bob Head Street to motorists on Friday, March 18, for the first time granting residents access to the new ramp connecting Georgia 515 to Pat Haralson Memorial Drive.

As part of the opening announcement, Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley also stated

that, according to GDOT guidelines, the City of Blairsville will be closing the old entrance/exit ramp connecting Georgia 515 to Pat Haralson Memorial Drive the same day the new ramp opens, on Friday, March 18, at which point curbing and gutters will be put in place to permanently block the old ramp section to through traffic.

The recently completed

See Head, Page 14A

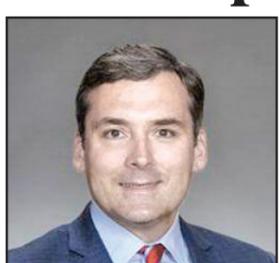


City of Blairsville workers spread gravel to shore up the parking lot adjacent to the new off ramp of the Haralson Development Project

Windstream's response to Rep. Collins

Dear Congressman:
Thank you for inquiring about Windstream's service in the Ninth Congressional District of Georgia. I commit to you and your constituents that I am personally engaged and fully committed to connecting your constituents' homes and offices with high-speed Internet.

I appreciate your concerns and take them seriously. As you know, Windstream also employs 380 talented professionals in the Ninth District, all of whom take immense pride in



Tony Thomas, President and CEO of Windstream

servicing our customers and are determined to address these

See Thomas, Page 3A

Congressman Collins: "Windstream response is more of the same"

Washington, D.C. - Today, Congressman Collins received a letter from Windstream President and CEO Tony Thomas in response to his letter demanding answers on behalf of his constituents in Northeast Georgia.

"I appreciate Windstream's response, but unfortunately it is more of the same. I appreciate the establishment of a 'rapid response team' in Cornelia, but this isn't simply an issue of



Rep. Doug Collins

See Collins, Page 3A

Vol. 107 No. 10
2 Sections 26 Pages
Weather
Thurs: Cloudy Hi 70 Lo 54
Fri: Rain Hi 68 Lo 56
Sat: T-Storms Hi 68 Lo 51

Inside
Arrests 8A
Church 10A
Classifieds 2B
Opinion 4A
Legals 4B
Obits 12A
Sports 16A

MARCH 13, 2016
DON'T FORGET TO
SPRING FORWARD

REMEMBER TO SET YOUR
CLOCKS AHEAD 1 HOUR
SATURDAY NIGHT

CASTING
CROWNS
AT THE
ANDERSON
MUSIC
HALL

LGPE Band
Festival
March 16,
9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.
March 17,
9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
@ UC Schools Fine
Arts Center

SPORTS
SOCCER
Fri Mar 11 vs. Riverside 7 PM (boys)
Mon Mar 14 @ Towns Co 5 & 7 PM

BASEBALL
Thurs Mar 10 @ Riverside 5 PM
Fri Mar 11 vs. Fannin Co 5 PM