

CHAPEL HILL NEWS

# Chapel Hill mayor speaks to GMA about COVID-19's impact on downtown, university community



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CHAPEL HILL, N.C. (WTVD) -- As COVID-19 clusters on the University of North Carolina campus bringing Chapel Hill into the national spotlight, mayor Pam Hemminger spoke to Good Morning America about the impacts of the virus on her town and community.

UNC-Chapel Hill reopened to students in early August but had to pivot to [remote learning amid multiple COVID-19 clusters in on and off-campus housing](#).

Prior to the university moving classes online, the town council sent a letter to UNC stating concerns about an increase in cases. Hemminger said they wanted campus to conduct remote learning at the start. The

Orange County Health Department had also written a letter to university officials [recommending the first five weeks of class be conducted remotely](#).

"We wanted the campus to go virtual. We know that if you bring that many students back in and pack them into dorm situations and Greek life, that we were going to see an increase in cases," said Hemminger. "So we wanted the university to work with us and figure a way to go virtual. And so that we would contain this virus more easily."

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Classes are now virtual at UNC, but that doesn't mean all students have left Chapel Hill. Mayor Hemminger said she's working with the university trying to keep the community safe while some students remain in town.

"It's been hard, we love our students. They bring this vitality back to our community when they come back every year. But we also know they like to congregate. They like to celebrate," said Hemminger. "They have signed a pledge saying they understood community safety measures were (in place). We meet with the university almost on a daily basis trying to figure out pathways forward. We increased our foot patrols and the university has sent their public safety officers into the community. And we write warnings and we actually write citations when students aren't paying attention to the safety standards we asked them to. And then the university has the right to take action as well."

**'I'd just rather not live like that:' Students move out of UNC-Chapel Hill dorms after just**

## one week of classes

Last week, Chapel Hill police said four citations were issued to people violating COVID-19 safety regulations. Mayor Hemminger said the university can take action against violations in many ways.

"They range the gamut from warnings all the way to de-enrollment from classes if students are having egregious behavior against the community standards," said Hemminger.

The pivot to virtual learning in Chapel Hill has reduced foot traffic to local businesses, but the town has made adjustments on Franklin Street to facilitate the changing economy downtown.

"So we are intertwined with a university that is that is the lifeblood of our economy here. And when we go virtual, it means there's fewer people coming and going from campus, fewer conferences, fewer sporting events. That hurts businesses, mostly in the downtown area as people come into our community to partake in those events. Our businesses are struggling," said Hemminger. "We did expand our sidewalks, increase outside dining so that we could help our restaurants and businesses be more successful. That's been an improvement, but it is hard. It's hard to balance the economy."

With all of the rapid developments, Mayor Hemminger said even though many will have to make big personal sacrifices, the main priority is keeping people safe.

"At the end of the day, the number one thing governments do is try to keep people safe," said Hemminger. "People are having to make sacrifices

some more than others. And it's a really tough situation. But it's about what the virus can do to the community. We are partners with the university and we're trying to work on this together."

## 'A lot of uncertainty:' UNC Chapel Hill Student Body President on school's COVID-19 challenges

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# Column: Local officials discuss how they're leading Orange County through crisis



Carrboro town council member Damon Seils (left) interviewed Quintana Stewart (middle), the Orange County health director, and Dinah Jeffries (right), the Orange County emergency services director, about the county's pandemic response. Photo courtesy of Damon Seils.

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*The OC Voice is a portion of the OC Report newsletter where local residents may have a platform to talk about local issues they care about. Damon Seils is a member of the Carrboro Town Council.*

As we begin Phase 2.5 of North Carolina's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it's hard to avoid feeling like we're entering another long season of unknowns. What we do know is the end isn't yet in sight. We have to continue our collective work to slow the spread in our community.

Rather than offer a traditional opinion column, I wanted to highlight the work of the two people leading Orange County's pandemic response. Quintana Stewart is the Orange County health director, and Dinah Jeffries is the Orange County emergency services director. They agreed to answer a few questions.

**Seils: You are the leaders of the local response to the pandemic. What are your roles, and how do you work together?**

**Stewart:** As the county health director, I promote public health and prevention activities. I'm also charged with communicable disease control. This requires my team and I to investigate cases and outbreaks and to implement control measures to slow the spread of the disease.

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**Jeffries:** The key words are “working together.” Our teams have different missions, and the two of us communicate frequently to assure our teams have the support they need. My team’s role is to ensure the safety of residents and responders and the continuity of services. We connect all the response partners and agencies so they complement each other and avoid duplicating efforts. We are also the county’s connection to state and federal assistance.

**Seils: How is Orange County different from or similar to other communities in North Carolina when it comes to the pandemic response?**

**Stewart:** Orange County has a diverse population. We must be mindful of language and other cultural differences as we share public health messages. We are also home to the UNC System’s largest school, which means we have a robust college town. Like other communities across the country, ours is concerned about economic stability and the social norms that have been affected during this unprecedented time. Our differences afford us the opportunity to be creative and innovative in our approaches as we work on our common goal of suppressing the virus.

**Jeffries:** Orange County is fortunate to have the resources we have and the support of government leaders and partners. I think every community has unique challenges, but I strongly believe every community is recognizing how dependent we are on one another. The pandemic has challenged my team to be creative and flexible while continuing to provide the excellent service the community has grown to expect.

**Seils: We're six months into the state of emergency. What are the most important things residents can do now?**

**Stewart:** This pandemic is very different from what North Carolina experienced with H1N1 in 2009. As difficult as it is, I ask everyone to remain vigilant in practicing health and safety precautions. If we remember to move in a way that honors and protects our neighbors, I'm confident we'll get through this a stronger, more united community. The health department has created a [COVID-19 website](#) with a wealth of knowledge, including health information, mental health resources, housing assistance and much more.

**Jeffries:** This has been one of the most difficult crises our community has faced, because the impact is not restricted to an area, and it's invisible. Our residents are definitely the "leaders" in the community by encouraging and practicing the guidelines. I've always used the African proverb "It takes a village" when referring to raising a child. It applies to this pandemic and taking care of one another more than ever. Our nonprofits can use your help, too. Consider donating to local food pantries and other nonprofits in the area. Consider volunteering, and continue checking on neighbors who are in vulnerable and at-risk populations.

**Seils: I'm one of about 40 local elected officials in Orange County. We're used to residents bringing us questions and advocating for the community. In a public health emergency, how can local elected officials be most useful?**

**Stewart and Jeffries:** Keep pushing the pandemic precaution messages, and stay consistent. Encourage everyone to continue practicing the three Ws. Continue representing your community by being a voice of reason. The most important part our elected officials play is maintaining calm and making sure the community has accurate information about the response and recovery.

There you have it: [Know your three Ws](#), [stay informed](#) and [help your neighbors](#). We're in this together.

*If you have questions about how you can help Orange County battle the COVID-19 pandemic, please contact the county's COVID-19 hotline at 919-245-6111. If you live in Orange County and want to make your voice heard on something you care about locally, email [city@dailytarheel.com](mailto:city@dailytarheel.com).*

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CORONAVIRUS

# COVID-19 cases at North Carolina universities cause county totals to spike

 By Samantha Kummerer and Maggie Green

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CHAPEL HILL, N.C. (WTVD) -- With 1,101 reported student cases to date and COVID-19 clusters in 10 residence halls, it's clear to Orange County officials that the decision to reopen UNC, even for just a few weeks, had an effect on the spread of COVID-19 in the county.

"The 18-24 age group as a percent of cases doubled in about three weeks so clearly that was the driving factor. We can't specifically say X amount of cases were from UNC but that age group being the one that exploded as the number of positives is kind of an indicator," said Orange County Community Relations Director Todd McGee.

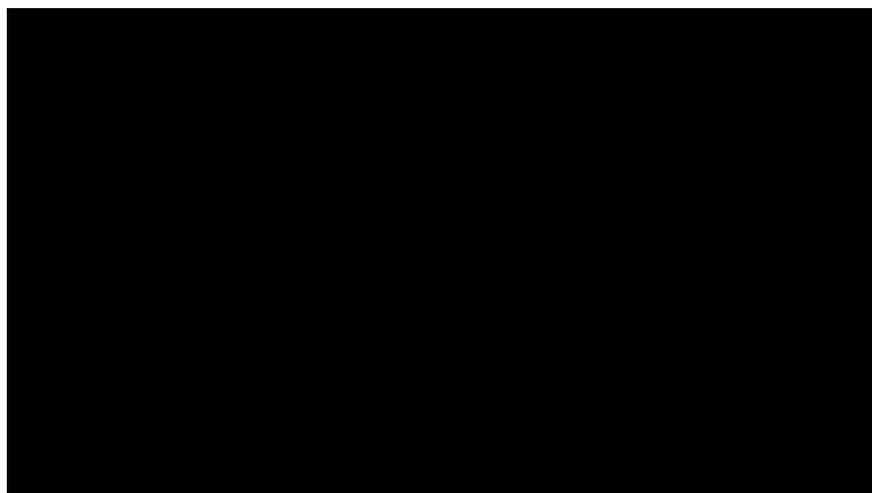
In the weeks following Memorial Day weekend and as

North Carolina entered Phase 2, Orange County kept cases rising at a slower rate than the rest of the state.

However, in mid-August, as the rest of the state started to stabilize, Orange County saw a sharp spike in cases-- in the week of August 19, cases rose 15%. The following week, that rate of increase more than doubled to 34%.

To date, there are more than 1,160 cases connected to the university. McGee said it's hard to say what percentage of Orange County's cases are associated with UNC, because many professors live in surrounding counties and students may use their home address instead of their address while at school.

**WATCH: Chapel Hill mayor speaks to GMA about COVID-19's impact on downtown, university community**



Chapel Hill mayor discusses challenges, working with UNC amid COVID-19 pandemic

However, several weeks after both UNC made the decision to [transition classes online](#) and move students out of residence halls, the county's case increase rate has decreased to a level more in-line with the rest of

the state--just a 5% increase between September 2 and September 9.

McGee said the county is still in contact with UNC officials and is hosting a weekly testing event in Chapel Hill. Furthermore, the university began voluntary daily testing for students without COVID-19 symptoms this week at the Campus Health to preemptively identify cases in residence halls. In a statement, UNC Provost Robert A. Blouin said a similar program will be set up of students who live off-campus in the next few weeks.

"We just want to keep those numbers driving down," McGee said.

Wake County and Pitt County, home to North Carolina State University and East Carolina University respectively, also saw similar spikes in cases in August. For comparison, Johnston County, which has no major universities, did not have a spike in cases in August.

In Wake County, the number of new cases added each week had been decreasing in early August. However, by August 26--two weeks after NC State students started classes, the county reported more than 1,200 new cases, compared to 744 the week before.

"As we saw the spike, we began to identify cases and follow our proper procedures and doing the assessments on them and monitoring and isolating for those cases," said Dr. Nicole Mushonga, a representative for the Wake County Health Department.

Though the spike in cases at NC State didn't have the

same magnitude of an effect on Wake County's numbers as UNC had on Orange County, McGee said the difference in county population could explain why Orange County's cases increased at a much higher rate than Wake County's.

"You look at Wake County and the population is about a million, so you know NC State's 30,000 students is 3% of the population," McGee said. "When you look at Orange County, our population is around 150,000 or so and 30,000 UNC students, that's 20% of the population. I think it was just a matter of numbers."

### **RELATED: [NC State students pack up, start moving out after less than a month on campus](#)**

This week--two weeks after [NC State Chancellor Randy Woodson moved courses online](#), Wake County only reported 624 new COVID-19 cases. But Mushonga warned that decrease isn't an excuse to become complacent.

"We really just have to continue to be vigilant in those preventative measures and to not let our guards down and just to continue with the three W's," Mushonga said.

### **RELATED: [Meredith College credits app with helping COVID-19 cases stay low amid in-person learning](#)**

However, Durham County did not see an increase in cases in August--in fact, cases declined throughout the month, even though the county is home to both Duke University and North Carolina Central University.

Duke University is still operating in-person classes,

however, the school was one of just a few that required students and faculty to be tested for COVID-19 before returning to campus, and is still conducting ongoing testing. To date, the university has reported 52 cases since the start of the school year.

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# The Daily Tar Heel

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## Op-ed: Local response to a global pandemic

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We in Orange County, including Carrboro, Chapel Hill and Hillsborough, are six months into our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The community has responded well, doing what has been asked and what is needed to keep the community safe. From the stay-at-home order issued in March to the three Ws (wear a mask, wait 6 feet apart, wash your hands), the community has stepped up, and the numbers have shown it.

Now, we face a new challenge, as local numbers have jumped due to clusters on the UNC-Chapel Hill campus. We must meet this moment, and we will.

Because an end date isn't yet in sight, it is more important than ever that the public understand how communities respond to a public health crisis. Orange County uses national best practices for managing disasters and emergencies. In March, county and town Emergency Operations Centers were activated to provide resource support to the community and coordination to effectively respond to the pandemic. This approach also enables us to request support from the state and federal governments. The EOC staff have worked around the clock to support the whole community's response to the pandemic – from feeding to sheltering.

These countywide emergency protocols exist to streamline communication and translate the expertise of key players into action. Who are those key players?

Our pandemic response is led by County Health Director Quintana Stewart and County Emergency Services Director Dinah Jeffries. They and their teams bring expertise that is essential to effectively addressing the pandemic at the local level. Every week since March, the three mayors, the chair of the county commissioners and others meet to share information and help guide the countywide response.



We are so fortunate to have this group of professionals working together for an effective pandemic response. While COVID-19 may bring unprecedented challenges, those working in public health, emergency response and county and town management have trained and planned for crisis situations. They are ready to guide us through it, and it is important we listen to them and heed their guidance.

One thing the pandemic has laid bare is our mutual dependence on each other. To get to the other side of this crisis, we need everyone to do their part. We depend on our emergency response leaders to direct the response. We depend on our residents to practice the three Ws and follow our emergency orders. We depend on business owners to follow directives and guidelines from the state and the county.

Local elected officials also have a role to play. Each of us must support the work of the operational leadership team and make sure they have the resources they need. Decisions must be made based on the insight and knowledge of that team, best practices and what is within our legal authority. As elected officials, we all should use our public platform to amplify messages from the public health specialists, with the goals of consistency and clarity. Each time county leaders issue a new order, we carefully weigh whether adding or changing a rule will actually help efforts to control the pandemic or hinder efforts by creating confusion about what residents and businesses are supposed to do.

For us, our purpose is clear: lead by helping the public understand what they need to do, and let the local public health and emergency services professionals lead the way. Perhaps most important, your council members and commissioners are supporting town and county staff to ensure that basic municipal and social services continue to be delivered. And they are thinking and acting creatively to apply lessons from the past six months to manifest the equitable and thriving Orange County to which we all aspire.

Local public health and emergency services officials have stepped up their efforts even more in response to the spike at UNC-Chapel Hill. Likewise, we all need to step up our own efforts as well. Each of us in Orange County is integral to the identity and success of this community. We are in this together. Let's do this together.

*Penny Rich is the chairperson of the Orange County Board of Commissioners. Pam Hemminger is the mayor of Chapel Hill. Lydia Lavelle is the mayor of Carrboro. Jenn Weaver is the mayor of Hillsborough.*