

OMICRON: So far, variant appears less dangerous than delta, Fauci says. **A7**

HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL: City rivals Glass, Heritage meet in early matchup. **B1**

The News & Advance



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'This was a game changer for us'

Blue Ridge Area Food Bank aims to boost community partners' infrastructure with \$2 million in grants to network

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The Blue Ridge Area Food Bank has awarded \$2 million in grants to its network of 60 partners in 25 counties this year, far more than the \$674,000 in combined giving over the last four years.

The food bank said simply supplying partners with food is

no longer enough — if it is to succeed in curbing hunger, it has to bolster the operations of its front-line partners.

BRAFB CEO Michael McKee said the \$2 million was awarded mostly to food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters, as well as some feeding programs that work with children and seniors.

"The grants were for a variety

of things that really helped them build their capacity and to serve larger numbers of people and also provide healthier and fresher foods," he said.

McKee said the BRAFB was able to increase its Agency Capacity Fund after receiving increased donations during the pandemic. He said if the food bank doesn't invest in the infrastructure of its

partnering programs as much as it's investing in its own infrastructure, it won't be successful in its shared mission with its partners.

In the midst of the pandemic, when partner agencies needed help more than ever, McKee said the BRAFB was fortunate its donors understood the crisis that was unfolding and the impact on

food insecurity in the communities that it is serving.

"So it gave us the opportunity to think about capacity building with our community partners in a truly transformational way," he said. "And so rather than simply make smaller grants for a free-standing cooler or freezer or a

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CITY GATHERS FOR LYNCHBURG CHRISTMAS PARADE



KENDALL WARNER PHOTOS, THE NEWS & ADVANCE

The crowd watches the Lynchburg Christmas Parade travel down Memorial Avenue on Sunday.



Motorcyclists drive down Memorial Avenue in the Lynchburg Christmas Parade on Sunday.

People from the Lynchburg area lined the sides of Fort and Memorial Avenues for the Christmas parade on Sunday, Dec. 5.

The parade, which was presented by the Central Virginia Business Coalition, began at City Stadium and made its way down past the Lynchburg Public Library before concluding at E.C. Glass High School.

Many different public figures from area public safety departments participated in this year's parade as well as a variety of local groups and businesses.

- Kendall Warner

■ **More Information:** For photos of the Bedford Christmas Parade, please see **page A2**.



Lila Smith and Kennadi Mayberry wave their Grinch doll during the Lynchburg Christmas Parade on Sunday.

VT lab hunting for omicron in Virginia

Fralin institute using genome sequencing to test for new variant

ALISON GRAHAM
The Roanoke Times

Virginia scientists and researchers are on the lookout for the new COVID-19 variant, omi-

cron, which was detected in the United States for the first time last week.

No cases have been found in Virginia, but the molecular diagnostics lab at the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at Virginia Tech-Carilion is searching for the variant in southwest Virginia.

Carla Finkelstein, director of

the molecular diagnostics lab, said researchers perform mutational analysis on each positive test on samples provided to the institute. This helps with both surveillance and understanding the latest variant.

"We want to be sure that if a new variant is emerging in some part of the world, we're protected and try to catch it as soon

as possible," she said.

The World Health Organization designated omicron as a variant of concern two weeks ago. Preliminary evidence suggests there is an increased risk of reinfection with this variant. And early data shows it could be more transmissible than

Please see **OMICRON**, Page A3

Senator, veteran Dole dies at age 98

Senate leader ran for president, served in Congress for 36 years

JOHN HANNA AND CALVIN WOODWARD
The Associated Press

TOPEKA, Kan. — Bob Dole, who overcame disabling war wounds to become a sharp-tongued Senate leader from Kansas, a Republican presidential candidate and then a symbol and celebrant of his dwindling generation of World War II veterans, died Sunday. He was 98.

His wife, Elizabeth Dole, said in an announcement posted on social media that he died in his sleep.

Dole announced in February 2021 that he'd been diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. During his 36-year career on Capitol Hill, Dole became one of the most influential legislators and party leaders in the Senate, combining a talent for compromise with a caustic wit, which he often turned on himself but didn't hesitate to turn on others, too.

He shaped tax policy, foreign policy, farm and nutrition programs and rights for the disabled, enshrining protections against discrimination in employment, education and public services in the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Today's accessible government offices and national parks, sidewalk ramps and the sign-language interpreters at official local events are just some of the more visible hallmarks of his legacy and that of the fellow lawmakers he rounded up for that sweeping civil rights legislation 30 years ago.

Dole devoted his later years to the cause of wounded veterans, their fallen comrades at Arlington National Cemetery and remembrance of the fading generation of World War II vets.

Thousands of old soldiers massed on the National Mall in 2004 for what Dole, speaking at the dedication of the World War II Memorial there, called "our final reunion." He'd been a driving force in its creation.

"Our ranks have dwindled," he said then. "Yet if we gather in the twilight it is brightened by the knowledge that we have kept

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Food

From A1

laptop, we decided let's do those things but let's think bigger."

McKee said the grant program is designed to increase the capacity of BRAFB partners so that they're not just able to distribute non-perishable canned food and food in boxes but also wholesome produce and meats that are rich in protein and often too expensive for those receiving it.

The Fillin' Station Food Pantry, operated out of Timberlake United Methodist Church in Lynchburg, received a portion of that funding, including a three-door cooler, a two-door cooler, a tablet and wide span storage racks.

Kim Tibbs, director of the Fillin' Station Food Pantry, said the

church pantry has been running for six years and before the pandemic, recipients would have to make an appointment and walk through the building to get groceries.

Now, the leadership of the church wanted to keep the pantry open while keeping everyone safe, so it runs a drive-thru operation every Monday.

The pantry receives a large majority of its food from BRAFB twice per month. Tibbs said it has sourced about 140,000 pounds of food from BRAFB so far this year.

The tablets are used to check people in and the shelving is used to store boxes, but Tibbs is most excited for the two new freezers, which still are en route to the pantry.

"That will allow us to offer different frozen meats," she said. "We have to have freezers that meet [U.S. Department of Ag-

riculture] compliance, because we have to meet USDA rules by being a USDA distributor. With the three-door cooler, we're hoping to expand our fresh food offerings to our neighbors and that will allow us to have more produce milk, butter and cheese and this will give us a place to put those items."

The Fillin' Station also received a \$50,000 grant from BRAFB to begin a capital improvement project to build an extra storage room onto the existing pantry as well as a covered walkway that will allow volunteers extra safety in the winter. Construction will begin in January.

"By doing this, we'll be able to maybe set up a Farmers Market style pantry where people can park and come shop," Tibbs said. "I think it'll be a huge impact and it's just amazing the opportunities we've been given

between these two grants that the food bank has provided. It not only provides for neighbors to have different offerings from our pantry but it allows us to reach more neighbors by the capacity of expanding our freezers and coolers as well as with this outdoor building as well."

Marian Dixon, president of the Nelson County Food Pantry in Lovingston, said without the partnership, of BRAFB, the pantry couldn't do what it does.

"They are instrumental financially, the ability to purchase food at reduced cost, the programs that they provide every year, this grant being the most helpful," she said. "They help us with a small grant but this was a game changer for us."

With money provided by the food bank, Dixon was able to purchase a 12-by-6-foot walk-in freezer, a shed, new

tents and pallets.

The Nelson County Pantry, at 9890 Thomas Nelson Highway, serves people from all over the 470-square-mile county and Dixon said the new freezer allows the pantry to receive more frozen meat to give away.

"This freezer has increased our ability to provide protein meats to so many more people," she said. "We're trying to give them enough to last them a good while."

In rain, snow or heat, the volunteers now have tents to stand under while they do registration at the pantry and the pallets allow volunteers to move dairy items in and out of the freezer.

The new 12-by-20-foot shed gives the pantry a place to store non-food related items.

"Because of all this, we have been able to double our capacity of operations," she said.

Omicron

From A1

previous variants — known as alpha and delta — but conclusive data is still not available.

Variants occur when a virus reproduces and makes a mistake in the new copy, called a mutation. When enough mutations have occurred, a new version of the virus is created. Sometimes these can be advantageous for the virus, such as making it more transmissible.

This happened with the delta variant, which was first discovered in India in late 2020. It now accounts for nearly all coronavirus cases in the U.S.

South African public health officials detected the omicron variant for the first time in late November.

"Thank goodness the folks in South Africa were very transparent and told the world quickly when they isolated this variant," the Fralin Institute's executive director, Michael Friedlander, said. "Now we're looking for that with our whole genome sequencing and rapid mutational analysis."

The research institute's lab in Roanoke receives samples from health districts across southwest Virginia and the rest of the state. They first determine whether the sample is positive or negative for COVID-19.

Positive samples are then analyzed using a rapid mutational analysis. Researchers analyze only the regions of the gene that are relevant to the variant,

such as omicron, and look to see whether all mutations associated with that variant are present. Results are available in as soon as 12 hours.

Some positive samples are also selected to undergo whole genome sequencing, which can give a more complete picture of the virus with all of its mutations. Samples are selected based on different characteristics. If the patient has been sick for a long time or has had a severe case, or if the patient traveled to a particular area, the sample could be selected for further study.

Finkelstein said her lab is running between 200 and 350 whole genome sequences per week.

The sequencing can take a few days to complete, so the rapid mutational analysis is useful to provide officials with a quick result they can use in public health responses.

Labs across the country are completing genome sequencing on positive COVID-19 samples in an effort to track known variants and look out for new ones. The U.S. has lagged

behind other countries in the percentage of samples it sequences, which can affect how quickly public health officials respond to and detect new variants.

Virginia is also behind some other states as well. According to data from the CDC, Virginia has sequenced 2.76% of its positive cases, but some other states have sequenced close to 9%.

Researchers and public health officials are interested in genome sequencing in order to track each COVID-19 mutation and determine which new variants may get a foothold in the region. This can help shape robust public health responses.

"The only way you can really do that in a proactive way, to be able to respond in a timely way, is to be out ahead of it," Friedlander said. "If you wait until there's millions of cases of omicron, and then we start analyzing for it, we've already missed the opportunity to do anything about it."

The Fralin Biomedical Research Institute started performing genome se-

quencing after months of conducting COVID-19 testing for the state.

Finkelstein and other researchers froze positive samples and kept them in storage. The institute was interested in going back to the samples to see when mutations happened in the region. Finkelstein eventually developed the rapid mutational analysis to study the samples. The institute alerted the state about their capability to do the rapid analysis and the whole genome sequencing.

The institute was able to submit an application to the state to complete the work and be reimbursed for the millions of dollars worth of tests being done, Friedlander said. The institute shares results with the Virginia Department of Health on a daily basis.

Friedlander said researchers involved with the lab at first set aside their normal projects and jobs to volunteer their time to do the COVID-19 testing and

sequencing. Cancer, brain and heart researchers came together to use their skills in molecular biology to analyze the samples.

"I really think science is a social responsibility," Finkelstein said. "And I think it was time for some of us to step up and help our community."

Finkelstein normally spends her days studying the effect of circadian rhythms on cancer and tumor growth. She has continued her research while also running the molecular diagnostics lab.

Friedlander said the institute received funding from Go Virginia, a business-led economic initiative, to hire full-time workers for the lab, which has freed up more researchers to continue their work.

"You prepare your whole life and this is a moment where you need to apply everything you have learned," Finkelstein said. "I really feel like I'm contributing my knowledge as a scientist to solve an issue that is a problem in our community."

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