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2021

AN EVENING SUN PUBLICATION

Chenango County Sheriff's Office had a plan and was prepared for a pandemic



Chenango County Sheriff Ernest R. Cutting Jr. and Undersheriff Daniel Frair outside of the Chenango County Correctional Facility. The facility was COVID free until just before the winter holidays but thanks to safety practices the outbreak was brought back under control and currently there are no positive cases.

BY TYLER MURPHY

Evening Sun Managing Editor
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In January, before the pandemic hit the the Chenango County Correctional Facility released 137 of 189 inmates, related to new bail reforms passed by New York State.

"That actually happened under bail reform back in December. That wasn't COVID related," said Sheriff Ernest R. Cutting, Jr.

"So even though it was under bail reform, when COVID started, it actually helped us in the sense that we had fewer inmates that we were dealing with."

As the virus spread and the state ordered a lockdown in mid-March the sheriff said his two main concerns were to protect key staff working in the Chenango County dispatch center and the inmates being held in the correctional facility.

"Initially, the first thing we did was shut down the

dispatch center and secure it from everybody else. Yes, they were socially distanced, but because there are only 13 dispatchers over three shifts, 24 hours a day, seven days a week for 365 days a year, if I start dropping two or three dispatchers, then there's a problem," said Cutting.

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COMMUNITY
VIEWPOINT



Bill Craine Chenango County Treasurer and Budget Officer

2020 was a very trying and difficult time for all of us. Each year I am responsible for preparing Management's Discussion and Analysis that becomes an integral part of our financial statements. In my June 2020 comments (our annual financial statements are available on the County's website under the Treasurer's Department) I noted the following: "In our lifetimes rarely has an event enveloped and so quickly impacted our mental, physical and financial health."

We went on to say that "at this time it is impossible to project the adverse effect to Chenango County and its residents. We are not sure that the financial impact will be confined to only 2020." In fact, we now know that local governments and schools will feel the pandemic fallout for at least the next three or four years. With your help we will get through this hard time.

With that backdrop, how did Chenango County government financially weather the storm? Fortunately, we had excellent sales and real property tax receipts in early 2020. By fall however, it became clear sales tax collections had fallen by over 10% and that NY State aid would be curtailed by at least 20%. These two items collectively amount to about \$4 million annually.

We dealt with this by reducing our 2020 spending by over 2.5% (on a \$95 million budget) and adopting a 2021 budget with still less spending. In fact, over the last eight years our spending has increased by only 1.25% per year or slightly less than the rate of inflation. This is quite amazing as about 20% of our outflow is on healthcare (Medicaid and our employee health plan). Most notably our benefit plan costs have increased by just 2% per year since 2013. This record will match up well with other large local employers.

Fortunately, by our late fall 2021 budget adoption due date, sales tax revenues had stabilized. We also had tremendous help from our Department Heads who further shaved costs. This type of effort allowed us to offset a reduction of over \$1 million in interest earnings on our US Treasury portfolio. In March 2020 we saw interest rates on \$50 million of Treasury holdings drop from over 2% to almost zero.

Because of the County's strong financial base, which has taken years to build but is easy to lose, we were able to overcome obstacles and adopt our tenth straight tax cap compliant budget. Taxes increased 1.79% on average. Please note no one municipality pays an average tax rate as each entity's individual rate depends on overall assessed values and changes in equalization rates.

The County continues to be one of only two debt free counties in the state and maintains high marks from the NY Comptroller's Office for its lack of "financial stress."

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Reese-Marshall: New leadership meets steady demand with a dedicated staff

BY TYLER MURPHY

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NORWICH - Reese-Marshall transitioned to new leadership in 2020, welcoming new Division President Lisa Colabelli to lead the organization in July.

Colabelli joined the company in October 2019, a few months before the pandemic hit and transitioned into the leadership position for Reese-Marshall, based in Norwich, and Paul Oil Co., based in Hamilton.

The two companies are divisions owned by Reinhardt Corp which operates a number of energy companies in Chenango



Division President Lisa Colabelli took over Reese-Marshall this summer in the middle of the pandemic. Demand for fuel has not changed but some customers have struggled with a lack of employment. (Photo by Tyler Murphy)

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Reese-Marshall: New leadership meets steady demand with a dedicated staff –

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and the surrounding counties.

Well known locally, Reese-Marshall provides service to about 4,000 residents and Paul Oil Co. provides services to more than a 1,000.

Colabelli trained with the former division president, Rhonda Wightman, before taking over the job. Wightman had been with the company for four decades, and president for five years. Before joining Reese-Marshall Colabelli had worked for Frontier Communications for 29 years.

“When I came into the organization, obviously I didn’t have the background of home heating. I came from a telecommunications background. Although there are some similarities, as far as having technicians and providing service needs to your customers – in the fuel business itself I had a great deal to learn and so that was a huge learning curve.”

Colabelli spent the months leading up to the transition learning about the details of fuel types, their cost, usage and the equipment. She also had to familiarize herself with a critical part of the business, the bulk purchasing

and distribution of those fuels within the company. Those operations being done in advance and without interruption are what thousands of customers rely upon.

“As far as our customer base and providing pricing, all that was quite a bit to learn in a fairly short amount of time,” she said.

Doing business in a pandemic

Colabelli took over as president in the middle of a pandemic and a state ordered lockdown, but the fuel service delivery industry was deemed an essential business.

The health and safety measures put into place changed how the business would normally operate. The company saw more customers struggling to pay their bills and Reese-Marshall adopted a more flexible approach and payment methods to reflect the unprecedented economic challenges many loyal customers are facing due to COVID-19

“Once we headed into the pandemic, we found we were starting to have more customers - because of reduction in employment, those customers were experiencing some challenges and so we had to work with them to help them through this difficult

time,” she said.

“Because if they’re on a reduced income they might say, ‘Is there payment arrangements that I can make? Because I just can’t meet what I really would have traditionally done, where I pay my monthly bill.’”

For customers facing very serious economic challenges Reese-Marshall helps direct them to local resources like the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP).

“We work with them as best we can offer them, if they are in a situation where they really just don’t have anything and they really need some fuel, we tell them about HEAP and the availability of that, how they could check with the county to see if they qualify,” said Colabelli. “We try to work with them as best we can, but then also point them in the direction if they need other resources to help them.”

Farmers are a big part of Reese-Marshall’s business.

“We have a special farmers’ program that we run where there’s special pricing for them. Once you get into that, because of the volumes being used, there is a special program that provides reduced pricing.”

Being such large and consistent customers, the company did everything it could to help those having financial trouble, because an investment in those kinds of large customers is really an investment in their own company long term, explained Colabelli.

“They certainly use a great deal of diesel. The tractors and farm equipment and everything that goes into that. Quite a few of them use large volumes and so that really grows that side of our business. Because they use so much, we can get bulk pricing options regular residential homes likely can’t, and that can help save costs,” she said.

With all of the company’s efforts to help those struggling to pay their bills, she said “I think that it has to be individualized on a case-to-case basis.”

Another challenge was being able to provide services in customers’ homes, such as repairs, installs or cleanings to heating systems.

“There was a little reduction there. The repair side stayed consistent, but our installs and our cleaning people were a little more hesitant to have people come in to do those things, so they held off,” said Colabelli.



Reese-Marshall Division President Lisa Colabelli

“Customers didn’t necessarily want us to come into their homes during the pandemic, there was a lot of uncertainty in people’s minds when it first started and even still now.”

So, the company did everything it could to provide proper protective equipment.

During house calls technicians had to wear a mask at all times, sanitizing their work area and vehicles.

They asked customers to maintain a 6-foot distance, with the company sending out educational materials and other information to customers before technicians arrived.

“Even when taking the calls, we remind them that while our people are

there, please make sure you adhere to that, for their safety as well as our employees,” she said.

The company basically took the recommendations of the CDC and New York State and applied them.

“People do ask questions while you are there, and we focus on answering them best we could. I think most people are pretty familiar with what was being directed by the CDC, so that it wasn’t really a surprise to them. It was really just reminders because we’re just not used to it. That wasn’t our life prior, so we always had to continually just remind folks of what we need to be doing,” said Colabelli.

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COMMUNITY VIEWPOINT

Bill Craine, Chenango County Treasurer and Budget Officer —

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I want to take this opportunity to thank our dedicated employees. These women an men work hard daily to make Chenango County a better place.

This is just a brief synopsis of our 2020 and 2021 financial highlights. The Evening Sun, and its Editor Tyler Murphy, have graciously offered me the opportunity to write a periodic column.

I plan in my first effort, probably in March, to talk about how, a number of years ago, we installed a series of six financial precepts that act as our financial guard rails. These precepts have instilled the necessary financial discipline to control spending and develop sound programmatic offers. That report will likely be followed in April by a look at how we ended the 2020 year from a financial standpoint.

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Also, because of the pandemic the company closed its doors to walk-in customer traffic.

They also installed glass protectors at counters so those arriving for appointments can feel comfortable coming in. Reese-Marshall is headquartered at 6254 County Road 32, in Norwich.

"We learned that we have to certainly be flexible in trying to assist the customers during this tough time," said Colabelli.

Demand stays the same as staff make changes

The company itself did not experience a financial hardship due to the pandemic, with demand remaining steady.

"Because the customers need to heat their homes, right? We've been able to maintain pretty well," said Colabelli. She said the changes in weather and other routine factors in the energy markets were more of a concern, not customer demand.

She said though service calls were down, demand for heating slightly increased, "Probably from using a little bit more, because they are home all day. They tend to want to keep it a little bit warmer but we haven't seen a huge change from it, but there's a little change there."

Reese-Marshall delivers fuel to customers, but in addition they also install

air-conditioning.

Specially trained burner technicians conduct the cleaning, new installation and repair services to home furnaces and fuel systems.

The company also maintains a 24 hour, seven days a week support hotline, for any customer having serious troubles or needing emergency repairs or an emergency delivery.

Though most of the services are provided to regular fuel customers the company will offer assistance to anyone who needs it, so long as the regular customers are not impacted.

The company reorganized their office and the staggering of shifts to help isolate possible contamination between staff.

"They're coming in and getting their day started, we didn't want everybody gathering at the same time, in the same place, so we staggered of shifts," she said.

"The biggest difference is how we interact with one another. It's more remote interaction with the customers, versus face to face, or an email from an office perspective. Out in the field for the drivers, things stayed pretty much the same because most of the time the customers don't really approach them but we did communicate to them that if they needed to make a payment to

tell us where they're going to leave that payment so there wasn't a need for direct contact with each other," she explained.

Reese-Marshall employs a number of full-time workers, including five burner technicians and six drivers for fuel delivery.

Both jobs require special training and certification by New York State, especially the technicians working on home furnaces.

"You do have to have some certifications with that, we often will hire people on and train them and help them to get any certifications they need depending on what roles we're going to have them use," said Colabelli.

She said finding qualified people in the area can sometimes be a challenge and she had been working with other local fuel companies to develop a plan together that would offer educational and training opportunities to people in the community.

"It is a difficult position to actually find a lot of experience out in the communities and that's one thing that I would really like to see change is to get some training sessions that help and created by the different fuel companies in the area. We would provide the info of what our basic needs are to get somebody started in that

type of position, so that it can help with the employment of people in the area but also meet the needs of our organizations."

She said it can take years to really become an expert because equipment changes over time and many in the area use older systems.

"In the winter time, certainly the burner department has its hands full. There's a lot of people with older furnaces and they will tend to have more issues with them as they start running more often."

The pandemic impacted the larger market for fuel initially, but after sharp changes in pricing for a short period of time, rates stabilized and have remained consistent.

"We really haven't seen too much actually, we did at one point when I think everyone knows that the oil prices tanked, and customers were like 'Wow you know it's really down a barrel' and so they were questioning where the pricings were and stuff, but that didn't really last that long. It didn't impact much," she said.

Planning ahead

One of the major impacts on the company is the scarcity of getting parts and equipment.

"I think it's just the availability of materials and of course the time, the shipping time. Which is why we need to order

parts and things ahead, to give extra time for those to be shipped in because all of your other businesses out there are also being impacted and that has reduced down some of their production," said Colabelli of the supply chains.

"As soon as we knew that this was starting to occur, we did order ahead. Even with that you still experienced some lag, but we were at least trying to build up our inventory for tanks and things like that so that we would not get into a situation where we didn't have any available to us."

She said parts that used to take two or three days to get can now take two weeks to five weeks to come in. Others are temporarily unavailable altogether for a period of time.

Colabelli has made staff a priority during the pandemic. When work slows staff are now taking that time to work on improvement to the Norwich facility, or go through a checklist of other projects to improve the work environment.

"We're really proud we were able to keep our employees all employed throughout this and during slower times had our employees for things that needed to be done here on the facility," said Colabelli.

Employees reviewed the whole facility. Staff

painted the building, replaced flooring, and did a lot of reorganizational work. They also built a new bathroom.

"A lot of those things we just took advantage of that time. A lot of our staff have skills outside of the work environment and we put those to use," she said.

"I am very hopeful that we'll be able to open the front door and start more of the face to face with the public."

"Certainly, I always try to make sure employees know they are at the forefront of my concerns and making sure that they feel comfortable coming to work and that reinforcement is making sure we internally follow the proper protocols," she said.

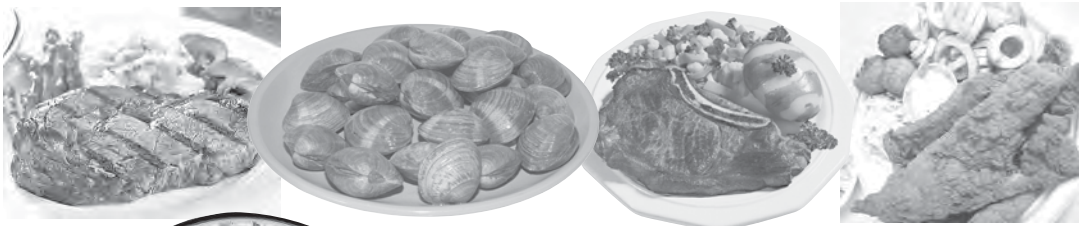
"With the vaccines rolling out I'm very hopeful that we'll start to see things working toward what you would call normal, but I'm not sure we'll ever get 100 percent there."

Reese-Marshall supports the United Way, the Chenango Memorial Foundation, local law enforcement and are a member of the Commerce Chenango.

Colabelli is a board member for the Chenango Memorial Foundation and a former board member of the United Way.

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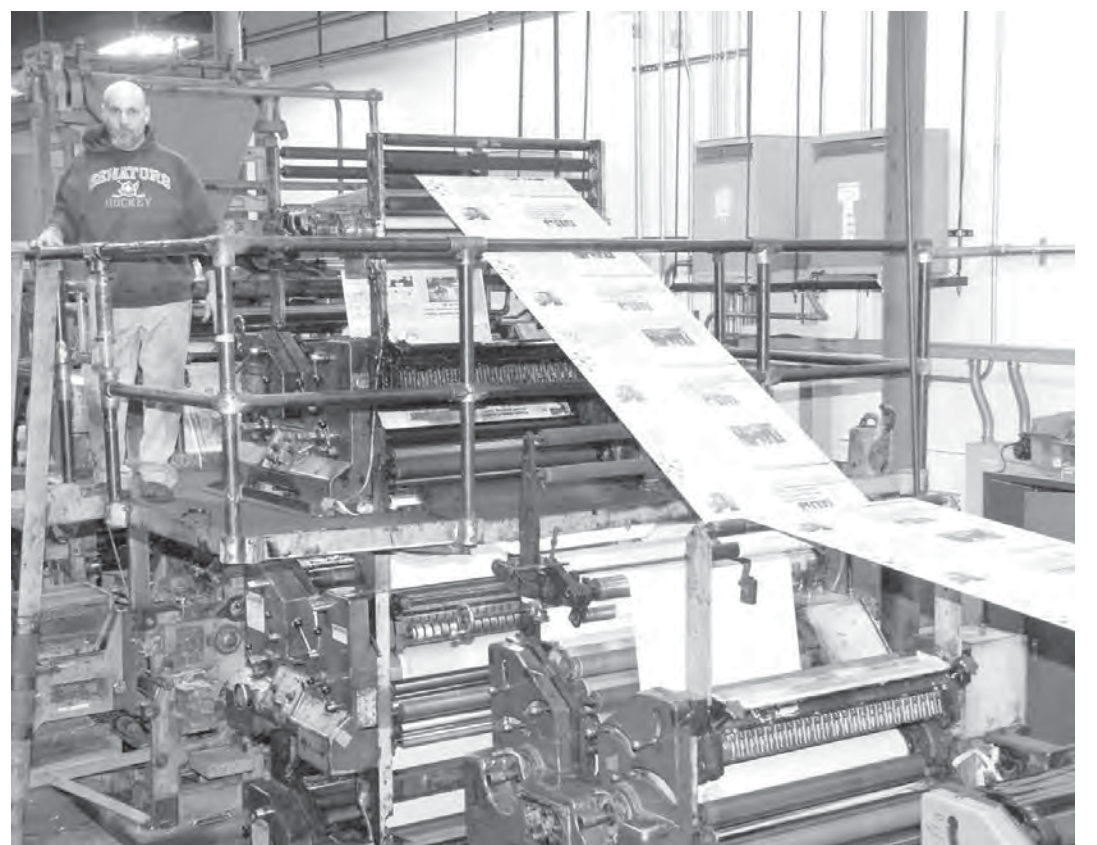
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Chenango County Sheriff's Office had a plan and was prepared for a pandemic —

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Chief Dispatcher A. Wesley Jones, along with 911 Coordinator George Finch, implemented tight safety measures at the center, such as masking, spacing and split staff into different shifts to help avoid any outbreaks.

The dispatchers work on computers in close quarters as they coordinate fire, ambulance and police calls, essentially, all emergency calls and communication in Chenango County.

Dispatchers require eight weeks of field training to learn the job and replacing such personnel on short notice could be difficult.

The sheriff also activated the offices back-up dispatch center so he could have two shifts working in separate locations, effectively isolating or reducing the chances of an outbreak that might impact enough staff to disrupt operations.

"We tried to split the staff so that we could always have, hopefully, a group that wasn't affected," he said.

Jail outbreak during winter holidays

Another area of concern was the county jail.

"You have a confined group of people that live in close quarters. A big concern was COVID getting in there."

Inmates and correction officers stayed COVID-19 free for the first 10-and-a-half months of the pandemic but late in 2020 a handful of inmates and staff began testing positive.

"We had a mini-outbreak after one of the pods started having positive coronavirus test results," said Cutting. "Three out of the four people in that pod tested positive, and it began to spread."

As staff also fell ill the jail set-up a quarantine ward for everyone who had a confirmed case.

Cutting said anyone on staff who displayed symp-

toms was sent home to quarantine, and everyone else who was in jail and infected was separated into a different pod. The sheriff also had all inmates and staff regularly tested.

"We shifted the inmates that were exposed into the housing pod, and sanitized the other pods to help slow the spread," he said. "We also went to emergency management and purchased rapid testing kits to try and get people diagnosed as quickly as possible."

The sheriff's office had approximately 15 positive coronavirus cases. Eight of those were staff at the jail. All those who fell ill recovered and none were hospitalized or suffered major health complications.

Unfortunately though the outbreak occurred just before the holiday season and the correctional facility was closed to visitors.

"One of the biggest things in corrections was that we had to shut down visitation for the inmates," said Cutting. "We shut it down for quite awhile. We gave the inmates extra phone calls and extra stationary for writing to loved ones, but that was tough on them."

The jail has seven non-contact visitation cells where a glass partition separates inmates from visitors.

The jail opened all the cells up, so at least inmates could see loved ones.

"One of the things I'm doing is we've gone to tablets in the jail. The company that has our inmate phone system supplied them to us, free of cost. Hopefully, eventually we can get to a point where the inmates can have a video visit with their loved ones. We're looking at this technology for educational programs, because those are being done virtually now," said Cutting.

The jail is again COVID-19 free and housed about 80 inmate in January 2021. Chenango County Public

Health Director Marcas Flindt said the facility's precautionary steps and strong response was exemplary.

One of the reasons the sheriff's office was able to respond so effectively was because it had been well prepared.

"We've always had a pandemic policy. We've talked about pandemics before. We talked about H1N1, and developed a plan and dealt with that," said Cutting.

The office had an established pandemic plan in place prior to COVID-19 becoming a public health crisis. The sheriff's office is also well stocked on personal protective equipment.

"We always have protective equipment because of the nature of what we do, so we just got more of it out. There's always gloves, there's always masks," explained Undersheriff Daniel Frair.

Enforcement during a pandemic

When the state ordered the lockdown in March the sheriff's office initiated a response team, to try and predict and coordinate all efforts needed to address issues being raised by the pandemic.

"We had been talking about it prior to the shutdown though. Around mid-February it was really becoming part of the national conversation. It took quite a while before we really had any cases here in Chenango County. We've been fortunate in this sense," said Cutting.

The sheriff also admitted that at first no one knew what to expect.

"I think initially we didn't know, and I was skeptical at first. All of the sudden we've got this new virus that going to change the world," he said. "I think the public at first was pretty skeptical too, but there were groups that were really concerned. We assured them that we're going to be here, and we've been here.

We are here to help them any way we can."

As the pandemic spread and the lockdown went on police began to see its effects on the public, with an increase of overdoses, drug use and incidents of domestic violence.

"It's very difficult. Overdoses rose for a while. That was something we saw. The domestic issues have obviously gone up. A lot of substance abuse, a lot of alcohol abuse through all of this. It's a challenge. You try to maintain distance, but you've got a job to do too, you know."

Those trends are still increasing and the winter season is often the time of year when those issues rise, even before the pandemic.

"Yes, they are still up. I think it's the tensions. Everybody is still, in a sense, locked down. A lot of businesses are still locked down. This happens especially in the winter months, in the summer time people get outside, so it's a little better, but in the winter months everybody's kind of confined in their homes and then people just start getting on each other's nerves. And it just escalates from there," said Cutting.

When police respond to calls they are required to following safety guideline but often those they encounter are not. It can be difficult to force compliance with someone under the influence of drugs or those in the middle of a stressful domestic dispute.

Apart from illness the pandemic has increased stress for deputies, correction officers and inmates.

"It is tough. It adds a lot of anxiety on top of an already tough job," said Frair.

The sheriff added, "In addressing the anxiety, we've had a few people that really got upset initially. And when they really start spiraling, you have to pull them back sometimes and tell them it's ok, here's the

guidelines and here's what we're doing. We've done everything that we're supposed to do. We're going to be OK. We're going to get through this."

The sheriff said his office has received few complaints relating to COVID-19 enforcement.

"We'll get reports and they'll ask us to check on things, and most of the time we check and they're unfounded. Most of the businesses, if they're open, they're complying, because they know they want to stay open. They don't want to have to close," said Cutting.

Frair added, "The vast majority of complaints go right to the health department. I know that they send out letters and stuff to different businesses where complaints have been filed by citizens."

As of January 2021 almost no police officers or staff in the road patrol, dispatch, or civil department tested positive for COVID-19, except one.

The Chenango County Sheriff's Office is comprised of civil, law enforcement, corrections and the 911 Center. Those four divisions are the main components of the sheriff's office. There are about 130 staff total, including 23 officers in patrol, 59 full-time and 18 part-time corrections officers, one mechanic, one maintenance staff, two custodians and about 14 kitchen staff. There are also 13 dispatchers, three in the civil division, two administrators, a secretary and a part-time accounting clerk.

The sheriff's office is looking to hire additional correctional staff.

"For law enforcement, the county has really stepped up with the last two contracts, and we're now competitive. So that's really helped my law enforcement side. We're still down with corrections though, we still struggle to get people there. It's a tough environment to

work in," said Cutting.

We will always be here to help

Cutting said the sheriff's office had to reduce its community programs and inmate work details in order to protect staff and inmates.

"We pretty much shut that all down because we don't want them out in the public and then bringing something back into the jail," said Cutting.

The sheriff said he was optimistic about the vaccine but people had to keep following the health guidelines for a while longer.

"I know people get frustrated and they're getting tired of wearing masks, but if you could just wear your mask when you're supposed to wear it, and wash your hands, those are probably the two biggest things that you can do to help prevent the spread of it," he said.


He said offering support for inmates and staff and sharing information was important.

"One of the biggest things was we had to sit down and reassure the staff. We're here too. We're going to be here through the whole thing, thick and thin. We're not hiding. Unfortunately, we're tasked, but that's what we choose to do, these careers. We have to face that reality. I'll keep buying all the stuff I can to protect them. They've all got sanitizers and stuff and all the counters and we follow the guidelines," he said.

"The pandemic isn't going to last forever."

In the next six months Cutting thinks the area will turn the corner on the pandemic and things will slowly start to improve.

I think we'll turn the corner. I think once the vaccine starts rolling out to the general public, we can get over it. But that's going to be a process," he said.



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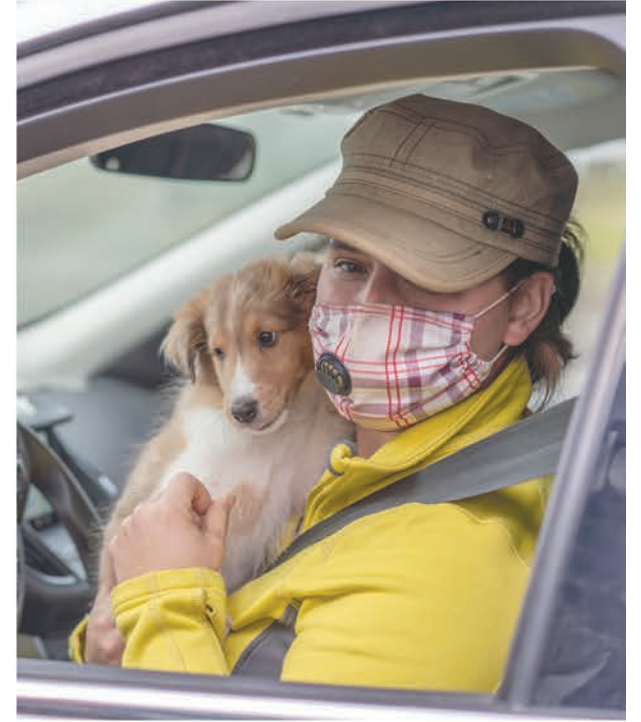


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Jim MacDuff
Service Manager

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Corey Warren, Ian Keyes, Mike Edwards

Service Department Technicians:
Robert Bourne, Spencer Franklin, Bob Sarubbi,
Jacob Bedell, Andy Ross

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- A variety of budget and burner service plans
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Our Area of Service...

Reese-Marshall Co. Inc.'s office and storage facility is located on County Road 32, in Norwich. Our service area extends to Norwich and the following areas:

- Oxford - McDonough - Guilford - Preston
- Mt. Upton - Gilbertsville - Morris
- South New Berlin - New Berlin - Edmeston
- South Edmeston - West Edmeston - Pittsfield
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