A year after the first COVID-19 virus cases drastically changed life in northern Colorado and brought stress and hardship, things are looking up. Vaccines have arrived to protect people from serious illness and death, along with a plan by state leaders to inoculate everyone who wants it by summer. Businesses and schools in Larimer County are reopening to serve more people. But we can’t let our guard down yet: COVID is still more prevalent locally than it was most of last year. And there are increasing numbers of COVID virus variant cases that spread more rapidly than the original virus.

COVID has killed 15 times as many Americans as an average flu season according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), including over 6,200 deaths attributed to COVID-19 in Colorado. However, increased testing, maintaining public safety precautions, and now vaccinations have helped slow the spread in our state and greatly decreased the number of people requiring hospitalization.

Spring 2021 feels like a chance at renewal—but only if we play our cards right. The most important thing everyone can do right now to protect your family and to move us toward safety and fewer restrictions is to make an appointment for the COVID-19 vaccine when it is your turn, says Jill Hunsaker Ryan, executive director of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE).

“We are suggesting that when offered the opportunity to receive a vaccine, people take it and do not wait. COVID-19 can become a serious illness and the sooner people can begin to be protected, the better,” Hunsaker Ryan says. And don’t worry about the brand of vaccine, as all three vaccines that are currently available have been proven to be extremely effective against severe illness and death from COVID, she adds.

Coloradans seem to be listening. As of April 3, over 2.7 million cumulative doses have been administered to residents, including nearly 1.1 million people who are fully immunized, according to CDPHE.

Spring 2021 feels like a chance at renewal—but only if we play our cards right.
Container gardens

The pandemic brought a renewed interest in home gardening. Container gardens are a great option for beginners, families with young kids, and those with limited mobility to grow their own veggies.

Containers:
Nearly any type of container will work—colorful ceramic pots, wood barrels, and plastic window boxes are popular. Size matters: Find one large enough that plants won’t dry out between watering times, which also cuts down on maintenance. Remember that the container needs to accommodate plant roots when fully grown. You’ll need at least a five-gallon container for planting tomatoes, peppers, and beans, and minimum three-gallon size for carrots and lettuce.

Drainage is also key, so check each container for drainage holes or drill several holes in the bottom. Otherwise the soil stays waterlogged, not enough oxygen gets to the roots, and your vegetables or herbs won’t grow as well.

Fertilizing:
Container plants need plenty of fertilizer throughout the growing season to keep up with rapid growth and drainage. Mix controlled-release fertilizer granules into the soil mix at planting. Then use soluble fertilizers when watering. Follow product directions for concentrations and timing depending on the type of plant.

Watering:
Container gardens do require more watering than landscape gardens—spread the work around to different family members.

Light:
Follow instructions on the plant label for the amount of sunlight needed when placing containers, and shift locations as necessary.

Soil:
Potting soil or soilless mixes (which are much lighter) are both good options, but experts stress not to use “native soil” such as dirt from your yard. Colorado soil has a high percentage of clay that packs down and reduces the amount of oxygen getting to the roots.

Plants:
Vegetables suitable for containers include beets, beans, cabbage, carrots, cucumbers, eggplant, green onions, lettuce, collards, bok choy, spinach, kale, tomatoes, peppers, and radishes. Varieties with names like “bush,” “patio,” or “compact” require minimal space as well.

Resources:
- planttalk.colostate.edu/topics/annuals-perennials/1001-container-gardening-basics/
- Email a master gardener – LarimerMG@gmail.com
- CSU Larimer County Extension office – 970-498-6000, LarimerExtension.org
- Instagram – Coloradomastergardener – photos
- Facebook – @LarimerCountyExtension – class announcements/seasonal reminders
Sarah has struggled with depression for years and lately her symptoms have worsened. She keeps putting off going to therapy because the last time she called 10 different therapists and none of them took her insurance or had openings.

And across town, Tom has a lot of stressors in his life and realizes he is drinking alcohol as a way to escape the pressure. After five years of struggling, it’s time to cut back on his drinking and learn healthier ways to cope with stress. He does a Google search for therapists and substance use treatment and is overwhelmed by all the different options. Where does he begin?

Sarah, Tom, and others in need can now skip the frustration and use a free online tool that offers detailed information on local provider practices and area support groups and classes. HealthInfoSource.com is a website provided by the Health District of Northern Larimer County’s Connections Team that was recently relaunched with a focus on mental health and substance use services in Larimer County. Staff can help individuals and families in need of assistance with mental health or substance use issues get answers to their questions and get connected to the service that best meets their particular needs.

Those searching for a provider/resources on the site are always welcome to call Connections at 970-221-5551 and talk to a staff member about their options.

“The goal of HealthInfoSource.com is to offer a groundbreaking, comprehensive source of behavioral health information for Larimer County,” says Lin Wilder, special projects director for the Health District. “We are aiming to provide up-to-date listings for all the local options for mental health and substance use services in one place—on a site that’s easy to search and filter, so people can quickly find the service that is right for their needs. This is a critically important tool for individuals, families, school counselors, care coordinators—really anyone who helps others find care—and it was developed with their input.”

Website users can narrow their search by filtering in categories such as provider specialties, treatment approaches, age groups treated, languages spoken, practices accepting new clients, types of insurance accepted, and other information about providers.

The redeveloped website recently came online and Wilder anticipates that over 400 providers and organizations will create a free listing on the site over time. As people use the site, they are encouraged to offer suggestions for other features that might be helpful by going to the Contact Us page on the site.

A key addition to the website is a focus on providing specific information on substance use treatment and supports in addition to mental health resources. Knowing who specializes in substance use disorders, and who provides specific approaches such as medication-assisted treatment (MAT), or substance use-specific assessments is critical to finding effective care.

Other useful features include the ability to search for groups and classes offered in Larimer County. The site also has a section with health guides and educational blog posts on the latest news from the behavioral health field, such as emerging treatments and new services available locally. The entire site can also be translated into over 100 languages with a single click to better assist people whose first language isn’t English.

**HealthInfoSource.com**

Want to learn more? Sign up for a Zoom informational session by emailing eleetham@healthdistrict.org.

**Create a profile** Larimer County-based behavioral health service providers and organizations are encouraged to create an account and start a profile as soon as possible.

**For more information** go to HealthInfoSource.com/faqs, call 970-530-2911, or email info@healthinfosource.com.

**Connections**

For help finding the right local resources to meet your mental health or substance use needs, or to talk to a behavioral health specialist, call Connections adult services at 970-221-5551 or the Child, Adolescent, and Young Adult Connections (CAYAC) team for ages 0-24 at 970-221-3308.
Growing up in a small town in northern Colorado wasn’t always easy for Kimberly Chambers. “I knew I wouldn’t be accepted for who I was, so I couldn’t come out,” she says. “I didn’t have a safe place to drop in.”

For those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, or other (LGBTQIA+), there are few safe spaces where an individual can be completely open and honest with others, explains Alyssa Wright, a licensed clinical social worker and owner of Integrated Counseling & Wellness in Fort Collins. “When someone can’t feel their most authentic and genuine self, they’re at extreme risk of mental health struggles like depression, anxiety, suicidality, and substance use.”

In fact, LGBTQIA+ youth experience much higher instances of suicide, substance abuse, and homelessness than heterosexual youth in the United States. Having support decreases these numbers.

“LGBTQIA+ youth in supportive families are 50 percent less likely to think about suicide than kids in unsupportive situations,” says Wright.

As a parent, educator, activist, and queer woman, Chambers understands these dangers well. To fill the gap, she created SPLASH (Supporting Pride, Learning, and Social Happenings) Youth of Northern Colorado, a volunteer-run, community program connecting young people 5-24 years old and their families to safe spaces, protective programming, resources, and referrals to pre-screened specialists. SPLASH offers weekly age-specific and peer-led support groups, activities, and leadership opportunities.

Organizations offering this type of support exist in bigger cities, but not always smaller, rural areas. Chambers, who serves as director, describes SPLASH as similar to a community-based gay-straight alliance, specifically for LGBTQIA+ youth in Larimer and Weld counties.

COVID LOCKDOWN

Like many nonprofit organizations, demand for SPLASH’s services skyrocketed when the COVID-19 global crisis hit. “When COVID really started affecting our young people in late March, our numbers jumped over 500 percent from the year before,” says Chambers. “We saw huge increases in need when kids were isolated from their safe social networks.”

Chambers added multiple online support groups and social events to keep up with demand, but she does try to host in-person events with proper COVID-19 safety protocols whenever possible.

“To a certain degree, online doesn’t fill the gap of in-person connection,” explains Wright. “For this time specifically, with everything being online, it’s even more important to have these safe spaces.”

EMPOWERING YOUTH

Chambers believes that to be relevant with kids, adults need to meet them where they are, and not the other way around. From social media outreach to planning events and making decisions, SPLASH youth are encouraged to be involved and take on leadership roles.

“Call me crazy, and sometimes it’s difficult, but I encourage our board to have youth in voting, board positions,” says Chambers. “It keeps us accountable, empowers youth, and it keeps our goals and strategies relevant.”

The SPLASH Ambassador program provides training in suicide prevention and other peer interventions, giving youth tools to identify peers who might need help but don’t feel comfortable going directly to an adult.

“In my adult life, family and friends have given me space to discover and be my authentic self,” says Chambers. “I feel it’s worth returning that empowerment, to make sure kids can stay alive.”

If you or someone you know is under 25, having a mental health crisis, and LGBTQIA+, contact The Trevor Project 24/7 at 1-866-488-7386, text START to 678-678, or via chat at thetrevorproject.org/help. Or call the SummitStone Crisis Line at 970-494-4200, ext. 4.

Link to SPLASH website: linktr.ee/splashnoco

*Check times and locations at splashnoco.org. Check out upcoming events on social media at #splashnoco.

Contact: info@splashnoco.org or text 970-444-LGBT for additional information.
“Completing your advance care planning documents is critical at any time, but during the COVID-19 pandemic it’s especially important to get them done,” says Mindy Rickard, coordinator of the Health District of Northern Larimer County’s Advance Care Planning Program.

Nobody knows that better than Kate Spruiell, who became seriously ill with COVID in March 2020. Hospitalized and sick for 11 days straight, she lost 15 pounds and experienced blackouts. “I honestly didn’t know if I would make it,” she says. Fortunately, Spruiell had worked with Rickard years earlier to prepare advance directives ensuring that her health-care agent would follow her treatment wishes if she were ever unable to make her own health-care decisions.

Larimer Advance Care Planning (LACP) is a free resource anyone can tap to learn about and complete their advance directives, such as a living will. These are legal documents that specify how you want to be treated and who you want to be your health-care decision-maker if you become seriously ill or injured.

“Mindy made it very simple,” says Spruiell. “She met with my husband and me to help us understand the forms and complete them.”

Creating advance directives begins with thinking about the kind of treatment you would want during a medical crisis and who you would want to speak for you—and then talking about it.

“I encourage people to have a conversation with their family and tell them who they’ve appointed as their health-care agent and what their wishes are if they’re unable to make decisions for themselves,” says Rickard. “It’s important to have these conversations around the kitchen table and not the ICU—and to choose an alternate agent as well.”

“Be very mindful about who you select,” advises Peggy Budai, a nurse practitioner with UCHealth’s Older Adult and Palliative Care Programs. A partner or child may not always be the best choice, because their emotions might interfere with their ability to think clearly or communicate effectively. A friend or sibling might be a better choice for your health-care agent, also known as a health-care proxy, or medical decision-maker.

“The most important part is documenting your health-care wishes, relaying that information to the people you’ve chosen to act on your behalf, and continuing that conversation,” says Budai.

If your wishes or circumstances change, you can revise your advance directives at any time.

Your health-care agent’s responsibilities kick in only when you’re unable to make your own decisions or you don’t feel well enough to make those decisions. Once you get better, as in Spruiell’s case, you can make your own decisions again.

After completing your advance directives, the final steps are to get them notarized and to your health-care agents and providers. Rickard and LACP help with that, too, scanning your documents into UCHealth and Banner Health electronic health records and providing copies for you to share with your loved ones.

Studies show that advance care planning improves patient outcomes and quality of care. It also reduces stress and the burden on families as to whether they are making the right decision.

Spruiell says she felt a weight had been lifted after completing her advance care plans with LACP. “You can’t beat the cost [free]. It’s nice to know that once you’ve made your plan, there’s somebody out there speaking on your behalf.”

Every adult 18 and older should have an advance care plan. The Health District partners with UCHealth Aspen Club and other organizations to enhance advance care planning in our community.

Larimer Advance Care Planning – larimeradvancecare.org, 970-482-1909 (virtual and in-person appointments available)

UCHealth Aspen Club – uchealth.org/aspen-club, 970-495-8560
over **191,000 doses** have been given through April 3 by multiple providers through appointments and community clinics.

These are positive trends because while the coronavirus is still very much with us, many health experts believe that the light at the end of the tunnel illuminates a world where folks will be socializing again in person, more people will return to the workplace, and we can begin reassembling our lives.

Once you are fully vaccinated, it is safe to meet indoors with others who are also immunized—or at low-risk—without masks or social distancing, according to the CDC. It typically takes two weeks after vaccination for the body to build protection against the virus that causes COVID-19. That means it’s possible a person could still get the virus before or just after vac-cination and then get sick because the vaccine did not have enough time to provide protection. People are considered fully protected two weeks after their second dose of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, or two weeks after receiving the single-dose Johnson & Johnson/Janssen vaccine.

Getting the vaccine allows you the freedom to reconnect with your support network and increase social interaction, things that are vital to our emotional well-being, says Health District Medical Director Dr. James Stewart. “Your comfort around risk is a personal decision, but once you get the vaccine you can start to think about planning that trip, visiting family and friends, eating out, and returning to a life less restricted.”

This means that grandparents can finally hug their grandkids, and friends can once again see one another’s smile while playing a favorite game, sharing a meal, or just catching up. Nursing home residents can hold hands with family members, glass windows and doors no longer separating them. What an immense relief people of all ages will feel after the heavy toll that lockdown has taken on our collective mental health.

**Getting the shot**

Three things to know:

1. The vaccine is free for everyone.
2. Most providers require appointments or registration for mass vaccine events. Don’t expect to just walk in/drive up and get your shot.
3. Transportation to and from your vaccination is available. Contact the provider you’ll be seeing for your shot to connect with available ride services.

Your first step is to register with the Larimer County Health Department so you can be notified by a local vaccine provider when you are eligible to make an appointment based on the state’s distribution phases. The form is online and can be found on larimer.org by clicking on the COVID-19 tabs at the top of the screen. You can call for help completing the form at 970-498-5500 weekdays 9 a.m.–4:30 p.m.

Check with your employer to see if they are coordinating clinics for staff. If not, large health systems—UCHealth, Banner Health, and Kaiser Permanente—are vaccinating the public whether or not you are a current patient in their health system, but you must sign up online and await to be invited to schedule an appointment. If you are unable to use the UCH online portal, call 720-462-2255 to be added to their notification list.

Community clinics including Salud Family Health in Fort Collins and Sunrise Community Health in Loveland are taking online sign-ups, and some Safeway and King Soopers pharmacies in Larimer County are scheduling appointments online. Select Walmart and Sam’s Club pharmacies around Colorado are also making vaccine appointments, so check their websites.

Don’t panic if you don’t get an appointment right away. Vaccine supply in Colorado is still limited and there isn’t enough vaccine yet for everyone who is eligible and wants to get it. It’s typical to be on a list for a few weeks before an appointment becomes available. State leaders stress to be patient and as supply increases each week everyone will get their shots.

**Vaccine equity**

Concerns over lower vaccination rates among people of certain popula-tions, such as people of color and rural areas, are being addressed by state and local public health leaders, local communities, and northern Colorado health equity organizations like Queen’s Legacy Foundation and the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) Alliance. Community and health representatives are working together to answer questions, build trust, and plan special vaccine clinics. The Health District of Northern Larimer County is involved through holding special clinics not only at its Bristlecone offices, but also at more convenient sites such as churches, and in communities like Red Feather Lakes.

“Our philosophy is ‘no one is left behind’, says Hunsaker Ryan. “Colorado has committed 10 percent of vaccines to community pop-up clinics where the state partners with churches or local nonprofits in places that people may find it harder to get the shot. Vaccines are also sent to pharma-cies in ‘vaccine deserts’—places that lack health-care providers but do have a neighborhood Walgreens where pharmacists give shots.”

**Protect you + me**

Although COVID-19 vaccines are effective at keeping you from getting sick, scientists are still learning how well vaccines prevent the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19 to others, even if you do not have symp-toms. Early data from the CDC show the vaccines do help keep people with no symptoms from spreading COVID-19, but we are learning more as more people get vaccinated.

Scientists and medical experts are also still learning how long the vac-cines protect people. And remember that while the vaccine is helping slow the spread of the virus, it will take a while longer to achieve community immunity so that those who can’t get the shot are able to safely resume public activities.

For these reasons, people who have been fully vaccinated should keep taking precautions in public places by following the 3 Ws: Wear a mask, Watch your distance (stay at least 6 feet apart from others) while also avoiding crowds and poorly ventilated spaces, and Wash your hands often.

The end is in sight! Some state residents are already fully immunized, and if the federal vaccine supply continues as expected most people age 16 and older should be vaccinated by late summer. After more than a year of isolation, cancellations, and loss, celebrating a return to everyday routines will be worth the wait.

**Get the facts**

**Larimer County Department of Health and Environment:**
Updated guidance, how to sign up for vaccine, and list of local providers. larimer.org/covid-19-vaccine

**Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment:**
Daily updates on COVID-19 infection rates and vaccine administration, public health mandates. covid19.colorado.gov/

**Queen’s Legacy Foundation:**
Information for the Black community on COVID-19 vaccines; weekly updates on virus spread. queenslegacyfoundation.org/stop-the-spread-of-covid-19

**Colorado State Vaccine Call Center:**
Health District helps with COVID-19 vaccination

Over the past year, the Health District’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic has ranged from offering emotional support to the community through its Connections phone line, to providing isolation, recovery, and quarantine services to those who lack housing.

In February, the Health District received limited vaccine doses and was excited to begin assisting with the vaccination of those within specific priority groups at our Bristlecone office. By March, special equity pop-up clinics were being planned and held at sites such as the Northern Colorado Health Network, the Cultural Enrichment Center, shelters for those experiencing homelessness, churches, and in Red Feather Lakes.

“Getting vaccinated will help keep you, your family, and your community healthy and safe, as well as hasten a return to normal. It’s how we will end the pandemic,” says Health District Medical Director James Stewart. “The best vaccine is the one you are offered, and we are committed to offering it in creative ways for those who are less able or likely to attend the large clinics.”

Ulloa Girón joins Health District board

Johanna Ulloa Girón has been appointed to the Health District board of directors to fill a vacancy created when former member Faraz Naqvi resigned to accept a position out of state.

A resident of Fort Collins, Ulloa Girón is the founder and program director for the BIPOC Alliance, an organization dedicated to building trust relationships and a mutual support network between BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) led groups and organizations with aligned values. She is also an adjunct faculty member in the School of Social Work at Colorado State University.

“I’m honored and excited to serve our community as a board member. I hope to center equity during my service,” says Ulloa Girón.

Naqvi, a physician and businessperson, was elected to the board in 2016 and re-elected in 2020. He also served as the Health District liaison to the PVH board/UCH Health.

The Health District thanks Dr. Naqvi for his years of service and welcomes Ulloa Girón to the board.

Ulloa Girón will serve until May 2022, when the position is up for re-election. The Health District is governed by a five-person board of directors whose members serve staggered terms and who are elected at large from the community.

Cochran-Ward, Ferrans named to Health District leadership team

The Health District of Northern Larimer County’s leadership team has two new program directors. Kristen Cochran-Ward was promoted from Connections Team program manager to Director of Mental Health and Substance Use Connections/CAYAC (Child, Adolescent and Young Adult Connections). She is a licensed clinical social worker who has worked at the Health District for six years.

Connections is currently working with SummitStone Health Partners to operate a 24/7 COVID-19 emotional support line for Larimer County residents struggling with mental health or substance use concerns during the public health crisis. In addition, Connections helps adults and families find the answers, options, and support they need for behavioral health.

Brian Ferrans now directs the Community Impact Team (CIT), working with Health District partner organizations and agencies to make systemic improvements in the community’s approach to behavioral health services in northern Larimer County. Ferrans’ team is running the COVID-19 Isolation, Recovery, and Quarantine centers in Fort Collins and Loveland for the unhoused population and those without anywhere else to go during the pandemic, among other projects. He served as manager of Strategy & Implementation for Behavioral Health with CIT for the past three years.

Meanwhile, longtime Director of Community Impact Lin Wilder has transitioned into a new role as Special Projects Director. Wilder has a 24-year tenure with the Health District.

Larimer Health Connect offers free help

Special health insurance enrollment period ends Aug. 15

People who are currently uninsured have a limited-time opportunity to sign up for a Connect for Health Colorado marketplace health plan through Colorado’s special Uninsured Enrollment Period—which ends August 15—for those without insurance or who may have lost their health insurance due to COVID-19. Larimer Health Connect’s team of knowledgeable Health Coverage Specialists are holding free appointments, mainly by phone or video chat, to help people find the best options for health insurance that meets their family’s needs and budget; find out if they are eligible for financial assistance; assist with enrollment; and understand their new coverage. Limited, in-person appointments are available at Larimer Health Connect’s Old Town Fort Collins office for those without a computer or internet access.

“Many people are shocked to find that there are quality health insurance options available at much lower cost than they would have expected,” says Rosie Duran, program coordinator for Larimer Health Connect.

Larimer Health Connect can also help qualifying individuals sign up for Health First Colorado (Medicaid) and Child Health Plan Plus (CHP+) throughout the year. Health Coverage Specialists can help people sign up for a marketplace plan, or change their current plan, anytime during the year if they experience qualifying life change events, including loss of job-based coverage and certain family and income changes.

For information or to schedule a free appointment, call 970-472-0444 or visit larimerhealthconnect.org.
**BOOK CLUB & MORE**

**for Mortals**

**APRIL 21 & MAY 19**

“Being Mortal”
by Dr. Atul Gawande

**JUNE 16**

“It’s OK That You’re Not OK”
by Megan Devine

**3:00 - 4:30 PM, WEDNESDAYS**

Join us in powerful, joyful, and even humorous discussions about the end-of-life journey and how others have navigated this event. The group meets virtually. To register and receive the meeting link, please email Project Coordinator Mindy Rickard at mrickard@healthdistrict.org.

**Can’t afford dental care? Call us!**

**Fees based on ability to pay • Medicaid • CHP+**

Medicaid dental benefit decreases next year. Use yours now!

**healthdistrict.org/dental**

Patients must live in the Health District, have no private dental insurance, and meet income guidelines.

**Still uninsured?**

You have until August 15 to enroll in a 2021 health plan

- We’ll help you find a plan that meets your needs and budget.
- No deadline to enroll in Health First Colorado (Medicaid) or CHP+

**Free, local help**

970-472-0444
larimerhealthconnect.org

**Can’t afford your prescriptions?**

We may be able to help you get your medications for lower or no cost.

Options may be available for those with or without health insurance.

For more information, please call to set up an appointment—our services are **free**!

970-416-6519

healthdistrict.org/prescription-assistance

**Thinking of QUITTING?**

We’re here to help you quit tobacco, with counseling by phone or video and free nicotine patches, gum, or lozenges by mail.

**Experience**

- Experienced tobacco treatment specialists
- Positive, supportive approach
- Sliding fees for those who qualify
- Covered benefit for Health First Colorado (Medicaid) enrollees

**Free, local help**

970-224-5209

larimerhealthconnect.org

**Can’t afford prescription costs? Can’t afford dental care? Call us!**

**For more information, see monthly calendar.**

www.poudrelibraries.org, 970-221-6740

**Presenter:** Mindy Rickard, Larimer Advance Care Planning