

## NEWS

## Mandatory masks

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various settings.

Rob Tench, general manager of Orchid Island Club, said “the county should make masks mandatory in all retail outlets until we see the state and county cases decline.”

Alicia Quinn chairs the Cultural Council board and co-chairs the Under the Oaks Art Show. “In an effort to reduce the spread of this virus and to protect those with whom you interact, I feel masks should be required in all public indoor locations,” she stated.

Jeff Powers, a John’s Island resident who started Float Hope, an organization that teaches kids in low-income families to swim, believes masks should be “mandatory or required for interior places open to the public.” But he does not believe masks should be required outside, where the virus appears not to infect as readily.

Brenda Lloyd, an active supporter of many local charities, likewise gave qualified support to a countywide mask initiative.

“I have no problem with having to wear a mask inside crowded retail establishments,” Lloyd says. But walking around outside or eating at restaurants are another matter. “I would not want to be forced to wear a mask when I am outdoors or at restaurants – inside or out – for obvious reasons.”

Learning Alliance education consultant Debbi Arseneaux gave a similarly measured response.

“Masks mandatory in what context?” she asked. “Indoors in stores, schools and other buildings? Yes. Absolutely. Especially anywhere you would be breathing the same air with people over an extended period of time.

“Outdoors in parks or at the beach and walking in your neighborhood? No. Keeping distance should be enough.”

Still others flatly oppose the idea of

any mandate forcing people to wear masks.

Hospital District Trustee Allen Jones, who strongly supports the voluntary wearing of masks, is one of those who opposes a mandate.

“This is America and individual choice is paramount, in my view,” Jones said.

“However, strongly encouraging wearing masks in all business or group environments, I would favor. The public needs to understand that this can be a deadly and highly contagious disease. I have one friend dead from it and another one a ventilator for the better part of three months.

“On the other hand, we know people who were barely affected by the virus though they had it. It’s courtesy to each other that we all wear a mask and social distance. I wouldn’t force people to do the right thing – it’s up to each of us to do that.”

Hospital District trustee, Ann Marie McCrystal, a retired operating room nurse, likewise supports wearing masks but opposes making it mandatory – not like seat belts, as she put it.

“I definitely am in favor of wearing masks in public in order to not only protect one’s self, but also to avoid infecting another person you come in contact with,” said McCrystal.

“I know that masks are not completely sealed and foolproof, except for the more sophisticated protective equipment worn in hospital settings. But a simple cotton mask that covers your nose and mouth is better than no mask at all. I carry a mask with me wherever I go as well as hand sanitizer to use as soon as I return to my car. Although some people think it is a ridiculous exercise, I would rather be safe than sorry.

“I applaud those who listen to the advice of the experts like Dr. (Anthony) Fauci and don’t give in to the advice of those who lack the clinical background and knowledge behind the recommendation of masks,” McCrystal said.

Diana Grossi, CEO of the Hope for

Families Center, was vehement. “I say No,” she said. “Use common sense. Sick people should not be out.”

Tracey Zudans, another member of the Hospital District Board, cites the CDC website urging masks if adequate social distancing can’t be maintained indoors. But she would not support making mask-wearing mandatory. “I think that government orders, particularly outdoors or arbitrary non-science-based mandates, are counter-productive resulting in less overall compliance with common sense recommendations.”

Ann Taylor, director of marketing and philanthropy for Indian River Land Trust and a member of the board of Ballet Vero Beach, is scornful of masks entirely. “Absolutely stupid,” Taylor said. “Masks do not work.”

At the same time, as cases spike

in the county, views on the topic are shifting, with some rethinking opposition to a mask mandate after seeing the fear of their older or health-impaired friends and co-workers.

Barbara Schlitt Ford, executive director of the Environmental Learning Center, is considering revising the center’s policy of not requiring visitors to wear masks after some volunteers quit rather than risk exposure to guests, few of whom wore masks.

“Masks probably should be required given the alarming Florida spike in cases,” said Schlitt Ford. “But I do think there will be a lot of pushback. When I am out and about, I see fewer than half the people wearing masks, actually more like 20 percent.” ■

Staff writers Mary Schenkel and Stephanie LaBaff contributed to this report.

## John’s Island service group funds attorney to help those facing eviction or foreclosure

BY MARY SCHENKEL  
Staff Writer

John’s Island Community Service League is taking action to help county residents facing eviction or foreclosure due to COVID-19-related job losses or other disruptions, leading a collaborative effort called the HEART Program – Housing Emergency Advocacy Response Team – that will roll July 1.

This comes on top of the group’s earlier response to pandemic-related economic problems.

When the coronavirus began shutting businesses down, the League immediately stepped in and donated \$250,000 to the United Way COVID-19 Fund – and successfully challenged other funders to contribute an additional \$200,000 – to help newly unemployed or furloughed residents meet such basic needs as rent, utilities and food.

For the new program, JICSL will provide \$150,000 to fund a dedicated legal aid attorney at the Florida Rural Legal Services to assist Indian River County residents in danger of losing their homes. FRLS has similar programs in Martin, St. Lucie and other counties.

Hope Woodhouse, JICSL immediate past president, said she had been surprised to learn that Indian River County did not have a dedicated legal aid person to help those facing foreclosure or eviction.

“Now, because of this project, we will have one. If it is successful, and we believe it will be, we will figure out a way to keep it funded,” said Wood-

house. “This project took more collaboration than any project I have ever worked on in Indian River County. It’s amazing. Everybody liked the idea and everyone was willing to help.”

While initial referrals will concentrate on the immediate problem of evictions and foreclosures, group leaders anticipate clients will also receive assistance dealing with underlying financial issues, such as collecting alimony, child support, unemployment or disability insurance.

“The only thing that they are not going to do is work on immigration issues. Our goal is to keep people from becoming homeless,” said Woodhouse.

Even before the coronavirus, more than 50 percent of local families were either living in poverty or were one paycheck away. With many working families employed in low-paying hospitality and retail jobs – the businesses that were shut down first during what ordinarily is the busiest time of the year – a crisis emerged.

“We definitely saw through the COVID Fund that people needed help with their rent,” said Woodhouse.

For the past year, JICSL members Ellen Kendall and Michelle Julian had co-chaired an Affordable Housing Task Force, collaborating with the John’s Island Foundation and working with the county to address housing concerns.

“But when COVID came, all those meetings and collaborations came to a complete halt, and we turned our attention to this, which was also obviously very housing related,” said

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NEWS

Kendall. These are “the people who had the biggest exposure to becoming behind in their rent or their mortgage payments, probably for the first time ever. And those were the people we really want to prevent from becoming evicted or even homeless.”

“I think we all recognize that there is a large homeless population in Indian River County,” said Julian. “And when we saw this COVID hit we didn’t want to add to that homeless population.”

“We found out this year, working through the Housing Task Force, that this county has all sorts of nasty ‘slum landlords’ who will evict people on a moment’s notice,” said Woodhouse. “They don’t give a damn; they’ll just say get out of the house. And people are so afraid, they leave.”

Although Gov. Ron DeSantis issued stays on evictions through June, the group does not anticipate another extension. On the mortgage end, the federal government has given automatic extensions of six months to a year.

Kendall said they learned from the Treasure Coast Homeless Services Council, United Against Poverty and the Veterans Council – the primary agencies distributing monies from the United Way COVID-19 Fund – that legal assistance was urgently required by tenants dealing with landlords and

homeowners negotiating with banks or mortgage companies.

“We were hearing that this is what they really, really need,” said Kendall. “We thought we could take this money and use it to fund a full-time position.”

“The HEART project will provide critical housing and other needed legal services to Indian County Residents,” said Jaffe Pickett, FRLS executive director. “We are grateful for the support the John’s Island Community Service League is providing as we address the needs of underserved individuals and families during these emergency times. We are also grateful to the private attorneys, who donate countless hours to expand our services to victims of abuse, elderly citizens, veterans, migrant farmworkers and other vulnerable clients.”

FRLS is located in Fort Pierce, so JICSL has arranged donated office space in several Indian River County locations for Florida Rural Legal Services staff. Locations include the City of Fellsmere Administration Building, Treasure Coast Community Health’s Gifford Health Center and the United Against Poverty offices.

“We’ll have this attorney available to meet with clients on different days in different locations,” said Kendall.

In addition to the IRC Bar Associa-

tion pulling together pro bono attorneys for the program, Kendall said a number of attorneys living in John’s Island have also “raised their hands to participate in this program.”

FRLS will screen people who apply to ensure they meet qualifications, including that they are Indian River County residents, are not earning more than 250 percent of the federal poverty level, are not here illegally, and do not have other liquid assets.

“If they have other non-housing issues, we’ll get them referred to other parts of FRLS where they have those sorts of attorneys,” said Kendall. “The efforts, generally, are to avoid eviction or foreclosure. We want to get the clients connected with the attorneys as soon as possible.”

“One thing we learned is that the minute you are evicted, it goes on your permanent legal record,” said Woodhouse. “We want to get in there before that happens so that people don’t have that blemish.”

“This is not to distribute rental assistance, but to provide attorney assistance; for counseling, for negotiation, for re-documenting of need for a mortgage or working with a lender. To the extent you need negotiation with a landlord, or you need help avoiding being thrown out on the street, that’s where the law-

yers will come in,” said Kendall. “These are people who are working hard and have never missed a rental payment or a mortgage payment, but all of a sudden now their income is reduced.”

The JI Community Service League anticipates that Treasure Coast Homeless Services, United Against Poverty, the United Way and the Veterans Council will be the main conduits for legal service requests, but individuals can also call 888-582-3410.

Florida Rural Legal Services will handle the search for the full-time attorney; in the meantime, they will use experienced attorneys who worked during the 2008 crisis.

Attorneys interested in volunteering for the program should visit [frls.org](http://frls.org) and click on ‘pro bono sign-up.’ The hotline number for clients is 888-582-3410. ■

### Reopening of schools

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One of the key points he told **Vero Beach 32963** he now intends to announce is that masks will be mandatory at schools for teachers, staff and students.

Moore’s presentation on the School

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**New Listing**

7 Royal Palm Pt, #PH-E: \$1,950,000      MLS#: 232895  
Breathtaking panoramic direct Intracoastal views from this luxury 3 bedroom, 3 ½ bathroom penthouse. Relax on the large balcony.



**Price Reduced**

1040 Andarella Way: \$915,000      MLS#: 232653  
Wonderful pool home within short walking distance to beach access. Gated courtyard entry leads into a spacious open floor plan.



**New Listing**

9049 Somerset Bay Ln, #302: \$899,000      MLS#: 233354  
Stunning third floor condo w/captivating views of intracoastal & Lake. French doors open to covered balcony overlooking River.



**River Club**

1636 Weybridge Circle: \$555,000      MLS#: 227095  
Lovely & spacious home featuring southern exposure, paved patio overlooking tranquil private garden & an abundance of natural light.



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