

Opinion

Support local business, and stay close to your fellow man

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

It was a cold, midday Saturday, and one of the front windows was folded open at Recess Brewery on Main Street in Edwardsville. Several people stood on the sidewalk, lined up for a chance at an assortment of beers. The bar itself was closed.



Grubaugh

steadily selling growlers, fourpacks and an assortment of fresh brew for carryout. Today, things are great, he said. Next week, he was not sure what he'd be doing.

Thirty minutes away, at the Popeyes restaurant in Fairview Heights, passing motorists were amazed to see cars in the drive-through, lined up and spilling onto

Illinois Route 159. A normal day, you'd never see such a thing. Traffic patterns simply wouldn't allow it. You couldn't escape the irony: One of the busiest roads in Metro East had little traffic, and a closed restaurant had more business than it could handle.

Not far away, the parking lot was empty at the massive St. Clair Square, a regional hub of commerce for five decades. I rolled down my window to take a picture of the desolation. A security guard in a pickup truck followed not far behind. I had him nervous. That made two of us.

Welcome to the new normal. A few weeks ago, people would have gone to work, gone to play — heck, gone anywhere — and never thought much about it. Now, they wonder what happens next.

Coronavirus is the scariest proposition to come down the pike in forever. Almost overnight, we've walked into a Serlingesque tale made for TV.

The daily routine changed so quickly that most of us, from peon to president, were

caught off guard. The warning signs were all around us in other parts of the world, but the masses simply weren't paying attention. Suddenly, somebody flipped a switch in our own country. By the end of Thursday, March 12, we had lost college and pro basketball, Major League Baseball, the National Hockey League, the stock market, Broadway and the XFL. That got our attention.

By the next day, Friday, March 13, President Trump declared a national state of emergency. Within days, we'd closed our schools, our churches and our institutions. Businesses began to shut down, and many, many people began losing their jobs.

One week later, our governor was telling us to shelter in place, and Congress was prepping for a multi-trillion-dollar economic bailout.

Which brings me to the aforementioned Saturday, with my wife and I testing the waters and driving the region, watching beer sales in Edwardsville and chicken lines in Fairview Heights. Businesses everywhere have been brought to their

knees and doing anything possible to survive.

The questions abound, both practical and philosophical. Are we overreacting? Do I need a mask in public? What is an essential business? Have our leaders all tested positive for lunacy? Have we somehow garnered the wrath of God?

The answers are out there but all TBD. Now, we enter April, looking for shelter orders to be lifted, praying for a miracle and hoping for wisdom from the greatest scientific, business and leadership minds in the world. And despite the uncertainty in general, there is one thing of which I am sure: Truly, we are all in this together. We must keep our social distance, but we also need to figuratively link arms now more than ever. We need to support our local business. We need to reach out to our fellow man. We must not give in to this invisible enemy. Eventually, we'll be through this.

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Maybe this pandemic will convince us that we really are all in this together

By ALAN J. ORTBALS

Some politicians like to claim that America has the best health-care system in the world but that's just not true. We do have some of the best health-care



Ortbals

providers and facilities and the things that they are able to do are simply amazing, but we don't have a system.

According to Webster's Dictionary, a system is a group of units acting together as a unified whole. What we have, instead, is a patchwork with widely disparate abilities of individuals to access it. It would be more accurate to say that we have the best health care that money can buy. And therein lies the problem.

According to a recent report by The Commonwealth Fund, the U.S. spends far more than other high-income countries on health care — more than \$10,000 per year per individual — but has the lowest life expectancy and the highest suicide rate. Our rate of chronic diseases like

hypertension and diabetes are twice the average of these other countries. We visit doctors less and have the highest rate of hospitalizations of any of our peer nations.

That, at least in part, is because doctor visits and medications cost money. People who can't afford them do without until lack of care lands them in a hospital which is forced to take them under EMTALA (the Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act).

We Americans have looked upon health care as a privilege, not a right, and efforts to change that view have met with powerful backlash. Clinton's 1993 universal health-care plan faced a barrage of opposition and died an unceremonious death. Obama's Affordable Care Act passed without a single Republican vote. While not providing universal care, the ACA did make some inroads on this front, reducing the number of uninsured by about 40 percent. It would have done better if all the states had expanded Medicaid as was planned but 14 refused to do so, denying coverage to about 4.5 million people.

There were numerous attempts by Congressional Republicans to "repeal and replace" the ACA but that was just a sham. There never was a plan to replace it, but that hasn't stopped them from trying

to dismantle it one piece at a time. Now comes the final assault that may finish it for good.

The big tax cut bill passed by the Republican-controlled Congress in 2017 repealed the penalty provision of the ACA. Almost immediately, 20 states, led by Texas and including our neighbor Missouri, filed suit claiming that because the penalty no longer existed, the entire law is unconstitutional. The Supreme Court will be hearing the case this year, and its decision could deprive 20 million people of health insurance.

The timing of this is ironic as the nation is under assault from the coronavirus, the president has declared a national state of emergency and everything from basketball to Broadway has come to a screeching halt.

Most Americans are covered by health insurance one way or another and for those who are not they say, too bad, so sad. If someone can't afford to go to a doctor or dentist or buy prescription drugs, it's not their problem. I guess that's because if you're diabetic, can't afford insulin, and die of a heart attack, they don't think it affects them. You should have made better choices.

But COVID-19 presents a whole

different picture. It doesn't care about your address or class or income. That retail clerk or fast food worker who just waited on you may be infected but can't afford to see a doctor to find out and couldn't afford the test or any medication or hospitalization if they did. They also can't afford to miss work because a day at home sick is a day without pay. Now you are exposed, and their lack of access just became your problem.

The coronavirus relief bill that extends unemployment benefits, increases sick leave for workers and provides free testing will help but it doesn't go far enough. People who lack insurance may simply not get tested because they can't afford treatment anyway.

Perhaps this pandemic will have a silver lining. Maybe it will wake us up to the fact that we really are all in this together and that an "every man for himself" approach to health care is not a rational course when viruses can spread around the globe in a matter of days. I doubt that this will be the last global pandemic. Getting ready for the next one must include providing affordable health care to all.

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