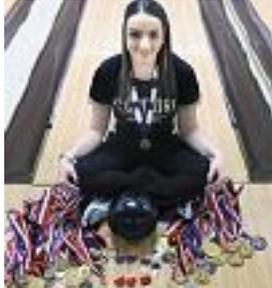


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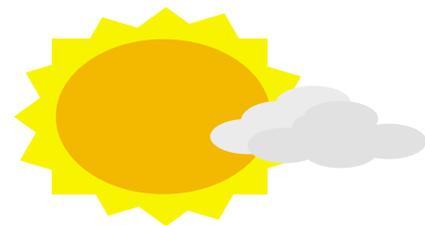
'WE ALL HAVE FAMILY'

- DeKalb area small businesses team up to support each other / 3
- County, Farm Bureau seeking masks for health care workers / 4
- Small school districts innovate solutions to isolation challenges / 8
- Gov. Pritzker announces 5 more COVID-19 deaths in Illinois / 9

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Complete forecast on page 7

DEKALB COUNTY UNITES

New initiative aims to support small businesses in uncertain times

By **KELSEY RETTKE**
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DeKALB – As days stretch into weeks for business owners in DeKalb County, unsure of when, or if, their doors will reopen, a community-led initiative is here to help, uniting residents as pandemic losses continue to rise.

DeKalb County University and Neighbors Investing Together for Economic Success – or DeKalb County **UNITES**, for short – is a small-business task force that began just days ago, aimed at connecting residents to accessible ways to best help support small businesses suffering because of continued COVID-19-related closures.

It's been 10 days since Gov. JB Pritzker banned all dine-in services for restaurants in an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, which as of Tuesday had infected 1,535 and killed 17. It also has been four days since a shelter-in-place executive order stretched the dwindling crowds buying take-out meals to even less and forced non-essential operations to close through April 7.

"As a small-business owner, going through 2008 is still fresh in my mind, as it is for many of us," said Cohen Barnes, owner of Sundog: IT in DeKalb. "Not only am I serious about my own livelihood, taking care of my family, but I've got 18 people who work for me. All of them depend on me for their mortgages, to put food on the table."

Barnes, along with Rena Cotsones, associate vice president of outreach, engagement and regional development at Northern Illinois University, are heading up the initiative, with area chambers of commerce, the DeKalb County Economic Development Corporation, the DeKalb County Convention & Visitors Bureau and



LEFT: Cohen Barnes, DeKalb County Economic Development Corporation president and owner of small business Sundog: IT, works in his office Tuesday in DeKalb. Barnes has been helping to develop a business initiative among local entrepreneurs: Buy local, sell local, eat local, be local.

BELOW: A sign outside Tom & Jerry's on Wednesday in DeKalb advertises only pickup or delivery services during the recent coronavirus precaution closings.

Photos by Mark Busch – mbusch@shawmedia.com

representatives from area businesses, banks and government agencies.

The mission? Buy local, sell local, eat local, be local.

"We all have family, neighbors who work for small businesses," Barnes said. "Everybody knows someone who works for a small business. How can we identify businesses in crisis mode, what is it they sell, what will make the biggest impact on them that we can buy right now?"

Cotsones called on the cooperative spirit of the task-force partners to support not just local businesses, but those they employ that are struggling, not knowing when their next paycheck may be.

"As an anchor institution in the community, NIU has a deep commitment to ensuring the economic viability and quality of life in DeKalb County," she said in a news release. "Small businesses are the heart of any community and they need help right now. Many are struggling to keep their employees employed and paid."

How it works

To get started, the task is simple: Small-business owners are asked to take a five-question survey that will ask them to describe what products they sell, if they're currently open for business (they can say no if they aren't), what type of purchase or aid would offer the biggest positive effect on their business's ability to collect revenue (future buy commitments, partnerships, etc.), and what can people do to help others in the community right now.

Data collected in the survey will then be mapped out into an intricate web of resources and go-to options for residents looking for meals for their families, apparel for NIU staff and grocery goods.

The small-business inventory will be disseminated to the broader DeKalb County region and provide encouragement for residents to order take-out during the shelter-in-place order, call a local business and order a gift



card, accelerate the timing of purchasing and support those looking to give back.

The one-stop-shop website also offers information on government aid and how to get involved.

It's the type of community spirit that's cropping up all over the county in the past week. Whiskey Acres Distilling Co. changed things up by manufacturing much-needed hand sanitizer for local health care workers and first responders. Residents pooled

funds to provide meals for staff at Northwestern Medicine Kishwaukee Hospital and supported local restaurateurs by buying meals at a different eatery each day.

"The people in DeKalb County have always amazed me," Barnes said. "To know there's a whole group of community members out there from all aspects of DeKalb County working hard to figure out what they can do to save some businesses. It really warms my heart."