

Ballad

From Page A1

region's residents," cost-reducing programs and demonstrated improvement on a majority of quality measures. "Based on information gleaned from the active supervision process since the merger on January 31, 2018, the majority of quality measures reported to the states have shown improvement, overall access to care has not suffered, and charges remain within what is allowed," according to the report.

Oliver also cited the financial peril of many small rural hospitals in conjunction with Ballad's commitment to maintain all existing hospitals for five years and its pledge to reopen Lee County Hospital.

"Ballad has opened an urgent care center in Pennington Gap adjacent to the shuttered Lee County Hospital, which is scheduled to be reopened by Ballad in October 2020 at a cost of approximately \$15 million. It is not likely that either Wellmont or Mountain States would have independently chosen to reopen this hospital due to resource constraints that were alleviated by the Cooperative Agreement," according to the report.

However, the report also calls for greater public participation in the evaluation process.

"Public input is vital to VDH's active supervision efforts," the report states. "In an effort to obtain more public input, VDH staff are developing an online comment/complaint form which will be made available on VDH's website. Information gathered from the public will better inform VDH's evaluation of the perceived and actual benefits and disadvantages of the Cooperative Agreement as well as high-

light opportunities for VDH to improve active supervision efforts."

Plans also include a new interactive dashboard on the state's Cooperative Agreement website and periodic town halls to obtain feedback from residents in Ballad's service area.

The report notes the extraordinary, current conditions that health care providers operate in, but said revised metrics will apply in the future.

"Within 90 days following the expiration or termination of Virginia's Executive Order 51, declaring a state of emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ballad will begin submitting revised metrics to VDH, which will in turn be published in a dashboard to be developed and published on the Cooperative Agreement website," according to the report.

The report echoes similar findings submitted in a report by Merger Monitor Dennis Barry to the Southwest Virginia Health Authority.

"The harms that can be realized by less competition are reduced access, reduced quality and higher costs to payors, employers and patients. This report addresses each of these issues and concludes that access has not been adversely affected, quality has overall improved and costs to payors and patients have been compliant with 'Addendum 1' that both states use to bar the abuse of market power," Barry wrote. "In addition, Ballad is making investments in behavioral health, population health, rural health and children's health that it would likely have been unable to fund without the savings realized from the merger."

The Tennessee Department of Health issued similar findings in its April report.

"It is the Tennessee Department of Health's determina-

tion that the Ballad Health COPA continues to provide a public advantage," that report states.

It also mentioned the public health pandemic, which was still evolving when the report was released and that certain measurements will be suspended until the public health crisis has passed.

"Ballad Health will need to be able to focus all of its organizational energy on serving the medical needs of the community during this unprecedented time. While TDH's COPA scoring system is not designed to adapt to unexpected crises, TDH recognizes the need for flexibility at this extraordinary time and intends to make appropriate accommodations with respect to next year's scoring as Ballad rightly prioritizes its response to COVID-19," according to the report. "We seek to support Ballad as it responds to the novel coronavirus and provides critical care to the residents of its 21-county region. We appreciate, perhaps at this time more than ever, the important role Ballad Health plays in helping TDH fulfill its mission: to protect, promote and improve the health and prosperity of people in Tennessee."

Ballad Health Chairman and CEO Alan Levine expressed appreciation for the findings in a written statement.

"Ballad Health is grateful for the hard work the State of Tennessee and Commonwealth of Virginia are doing to help health systems respond to the current pandemic, while at the same time working to ensure the creation of Ballad Health continues achieving the policy goals set by both state legislatures," Levine said in the statement.

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Postal

From Page A1

Trump told host Maria Bartiromo. "That means they can't have universal mail-in voting; they just can't have it."

Trump's statements, including the false claim that Democrats are seeking universal mail-in voting, come as he is searching for a strategy to gain an advantage in his November matchup against Joe Biden. He's pairing the tough Postal Service stance in congressional negotiations with an increasingly robust mail-in -voting legal fight in states that could decide the election.

In Iowa, which Trump won handily in 2016 but is more competitive this year, his campaign joined a lawsuit Wednesday against two Democratic-leaning counties in an effort to invalidate tens of thousands of voters' absentee ballot applications. That followed legal maneuvers in battleground Pennsylvania, where the campaign hopes to force changes to how the state collects and counts mail-in ballots. And in Nevada, Trump is challenging a law sending ballots to all active voters.

His efforts could face limits. The U.S. Supreme Court on Thursday rebuffed Republicans who challenged an agreement in Rhode Island allowing residents to vote by mail through November's general election without getting signatures from two witnesses or a notary.

For Democrats, Trump's new remarks were a clear admission that the president is attempting to restrict voting rights.

Biden said it was "Pure Trump. He doesn't want an election."

Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold said it was "voter suppression to undermine the safest method to vote during a pandemic, and force Americans to risk their lives to vote."

Negotiations over a big new virus relief package have all but ended, with the White House and congressional leaders far apart on the size, scope and approach for shoring up households, reopening schools and launching a national strategy to contain the coronavirus.

While there is some common ground over \$100 billion for schools and new funds for virus testing, Dem-

ocrats also want other emergency funds that Trump rejects.

"They want \$3.5 billion for something that will turn out to be fraudulent. That's election money, basically," Trump said during Thursday's call-in interview.

Democrats have pushed for a total of \$10 billion for the Postal Service in talks with Republicans on the COVID-19 response bill. That figure, which would include money to help with election mail, is down from a \$25 billion plan in a House-passed coronavirus measure.

Postmaster General Louis DeJoy has said that the agency is in a financially untenable position, but he maintains it can handle this year's election mail. A major donor to Trump and other Republicans, DeJoy is the first postmaster general in nearly two decades who is not a career postal employee.

"Although there will likely be an unprecedented increase in election mail volume due to the pandemic, the Postal Service has ample capacity to deliver all election mail securely and on-time in accordance with our delivery standards, and we will do so," he told the Postal Service's governing board last week.

Memos obtained by The Associated Press show that Postal Service leadership has pushed to eliminate overtime and halt late delivery trips that are sometimes needed to ensure mail arrives on time, measures that postal workers and union officials say are delaying service. Additional records detail cuts to hours at post offices, including reductions on Saturdays and during lunch hours.

Democrats, and a handful of Republicans, have sent DeJoy several letters asking him to reverse his changes and criticizing what they say is a lack of openness by the agency. Late Wednesday, Senate Democrats again wrote DeJoy, this time saying postal leadership is pushing state election officials to opt for pricier first-class postage for mail-in ballots to be prioritized.

"Instead of taking steps to increase your agency's ability to deliver for the American people, you are implementing policy changes that make matters worse, and the Postal Service is reportedly considering changes that would increase costs for states at a time when millions of Americans are relying on voting by mail to exercise their right to vote," the Democrats wrote.

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September 13, 2020



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Becky Sage
Great-Grandson of Mozelle and the late Wayne Guffey

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