

Human trafficking a community problem

By Glenn Harbison
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Many local residents might wonder how human trafficking might be happening here in Fannin County. Yet Illicit Massage Businesses (IMBs) are often fronts for illegal activity and there are an estimated 7,500 to 9,000 operating in the

United States, according to Polaris, a non-governmental organization fighting the activity. Polaris ranks Georgia with a high concentration of IMBs, similar to Florida, California, New York and Pennsylvania. Fannin County Sheriff's Office Investigator Dustin Carder explained the complexities of these operations, why investi-

gations take so long, and why the traffickers themselves are difficult to prosecute. Legitimate massage therapy requires a license, one that is hard to obtain in Georgia. It comes with required, continued training. These professional therapists are often referred clients by doctors and may even accept

payments through insurance carriers, Carder says. The idea of massage therapy opens the door for prostitutes who set up illegal "massage parlors." These IMBs are often fronts for human and sex trafficking, and money laundering in addition to prostitution. According to Deliverfund, connecting IMBs and human

trafficking is difficult since they advertise themselves as legitimate businesses. Instead, they are skillfully organized around a complexity of sex trafficking, labor trafficking, conspiracy, immigration fraud and money laundering. The difficulty in recognizing

See **PROBLEM**, Page 2

McCaysville building faces condemnation

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Fannin County Building Inspector Keith Nicholson was anticipating recommending the Post Office/Police Department building be condemned following his inspection Monday morning. "There are parts of the building that are settling," Nicholson said. Among the problems he saw were a half-inch gap between the old and new concrete on the outside, a three-quarter in gap where the floor and baseboard had settled inside, several areas inside where the floor had appeared to sink, and several places where the brick is starting to sink outside. "It's just like there is a sinkhole under that building and it's taking its toll," Nicholson said. The torrential rain August 1 and 2, which McCaysville Mayor Pro Tem reported at 7.3 inches, explains what could have happened, Nicholson said. The huge amount of water aggravated the situation under the building, making any sinkhole that existed much worse. "The building is not safe to inhabit," Nicholson said. He also expects repairing the building would not be cost effective since it contains both asbestos and lead paint. Nicholson said he anticipated writing a letter to the McCaysville City Council recommending the



Citizen photo/Glenn Harbison

McCaysville Police Chief Micheal Earley places his hand in the separation between the floor and baseboard in the city's police station. Similar separations were reported to be as much as three-quarters of an inch Monday.

See **LETTER**, Page 6

Prostitution arrest made in Fannin Co.

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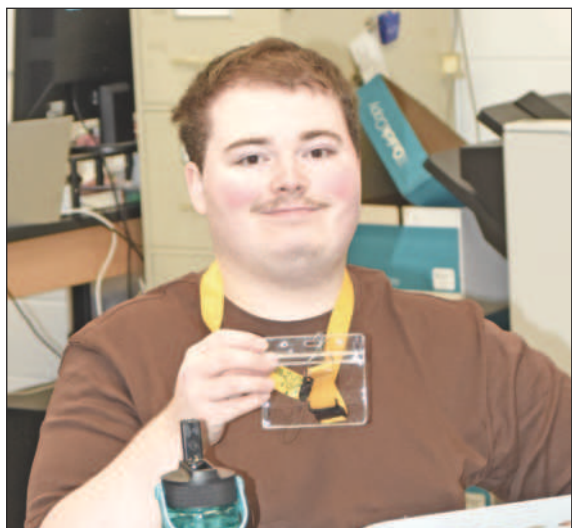
A suspected human trafficking operation has been shut down in Fannin County and the community is credited with putting a stop to the activities. Fannin County Sheriff's Office Investigator Dustin Carder said three search warrants were served Wednesday and Thursday, August 5 and 6, at AAA Asian Spa at 5850 Appalachian Highway. One person was arrested and the owner of the building told the business to leave as a result. Genhua Zhou, 55, of 4255 Colden Street, Suite 6A, Flushing, New York, was charged with two misdemeanors, Keeping a Place of Prostitution and Practicing Massage Therapy Without a License. Carder said the sheriff's office and Appalachian Judicial Circuit District Attorney's Office began getting complaints of suspicious activity at the spa in May of 2025 when the spa had only been open a few months. Carder opened an investigation that was joined by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation Human Exploitation and Trafficking (HEAT) Unit. Carder thanked those who reported the activity, urging the public, "If you see something, say something." The local investigation is ongoing with charges possible against other persons involved, Carder said. Anyone who suspects human trafficking can call the Fannin County Sheriff's Office at 706-632-2043, the Georgia Coalition to combat Human Trafficking Tip Line at 1-866-363-4842 or the National Trafficking Resource Center at 1-888-373-7888.

Bridge Academy supports transition after graduation

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Cheers and laughter filled the classroom at Fannin County High School Tuesday morning for the launch of the Fannin County School System Bridge Academy. The academy is a specialized transition program designed to support young adults with special needs after they have graduated from traditional high school. "Our mission is to bridge the gap

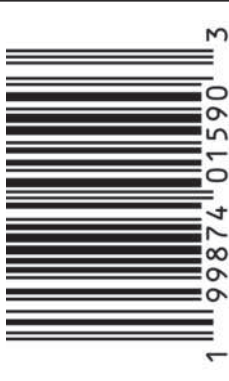
between school and independent adulthood," Lauren Payne, the school system's Director of Student Services, said. The first six members of the academy were celebrated with special gear and words of encouragement. Each spoke up when asked their dream job. Toby has his sights set on owning his own vehicle cleaning business. He told how he had been training to be a diesel mechanic like his dad, but when



Citizen photo/Glenn Harbison

Ethan Firestone shows off the holder for the picture that will identify him as one of the members of Fannin's first ever Bridge Academy.

See **ACADEMY**, Page 3



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INDEX
Faith 10
Victor Morgan 10
Tom Jordan 10
Gene Crawford 4
Arrest Reports 9
Dogs in Need 5
Cat of the Week 5
Local Happenings 5
Sports 12

MIDDLE SCHOOL BATTLE
Fannin, Basin scrimmage, p. 12

12 Pages / 1 Section



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