In It Together

Trinitas Regional Medical Center Staff in New Jersey Unites To Fight Off Pandemic
At Trinitas Regional Medical Center in Elizabeth, New Jersey, they’re in the life-saving business. They’ve cared for thousands of COVID-19 patients. They applaud and cheer when a pandemic patient goes home. They’ve also been afraid to return to their own homes, scared they’d carry a lethal virus through the front door. They’ve literally cried on each others’ shoulders. Some staff members got unbelievably sick themselves. Ten of them died. Chaplains have delivered last rites to patient after patient, bringing some measure of comfort to grieving families who couldn’t hold a loved one’s hand at the moment of death. They’ve blessed bodies in the morgue, and for a period of time when the morgue was too full, even did so in an overflow trailer space they called the Annex, out of respect for those temporarily housed there. They mail prayer cards and letters of condolence to those who have lost a relative.

Staffers there individually tend to downplay their own contributions, even as they thank and praise their colleagues. They take pride in being good at what they do. It has sometimes been awful, and it’s not over. But they’re in the life-saving business, and so they carry on and keep at it.

The 554-bed acute care teaching hospital and affiliated long-term care facility are sponsored by the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth and the Elizabethtown Healthcare Foundation. It is in the process of joining the RWJBarnabas Health system. The hospital will remain Catholic, and Trinitas leadership expects the transition to occur on January 1, 2022.

Trinitas President and CEO Gary S. Horan, FACHE, has worked in health care for 50 years, 20 years here. He’s such a part of the fabric of Trinitas that the emergency department is named after him.

“We saw our first COVID patient on March 8, 2020,” he said, and then relays a staggering number of decisions that he and other leaders had to make: ensure enough personal protective equipment for staff; create a new intensive care unit when the existing one filled; create more negative air pressure rooms; and separately supply supplemental oxygen to the hospital where care providers, who normally would have five or six patients on ventilators, had more than 40 patients on them at times during the pandemic.

“Sobering and very inspiring,” is how Horan describes employees bringing their skills to their work, whether an engineer figuring out a technical problem, an environmental services cleaner sanitizing rooms, a food services worker delivering meals or a medical technician or surgeon caring for patients — all while at risk because of the deadly pandemic.

The pace of COVID patients has slowed. Trinitas care providers administered roughly 27,000 vaccines through the fall of 2021 and they’d given more than 500 monoclonal antibody therapy treatments to patients with a 90% success rate, he said.

Strong community ties have been a help to those at Trinitas, with police officers and firefighters leading supportive parades and area organizations and restaurants donating meals.

Yet as a leader he still worries about the well-being of the staff and having enough team members. Even now, he knows some workers won’t get vaccinated and will have to look for employment elsewhere. One of Trinitas’ campuses, with long-term care and psychiatric care beds, had recently flooded when he talked to Health Progress. And so staffers “geared up again” to respond to the emergency. “We’re not immune to it, and we don’t like it, but we know how to do it and we do it well,” Horan said.

— Betsy Taylor

**HONORING THE CAREGIVERS**

To document the extraordinary challenges those in health care have experienced since the start of the pandemic, Health Progress asked Trinitas Regional Medical Center for the opportunity to interview staff members about their own lives and experiences caring for patients since March of 2020. As part of this work, photographer Aristide Economopoulos visited during two shifts at the hospital this past fall to document the day-to-day realities of those who work throughout the hospital. The opposite page shows Erin Neary, physician assistant, PA-C, and Dr. John D'Angelo, DO, in the emergency room. CHA thanks all those who have bravely responded to the call to care during the pandemic.