



# Leading Voices from the COVID-19 Front Lines

*Selected recipients of the 2020 Healthgrades Patient Safety Excellence Award and Outstanding Patient Experience Award*

**HEALTHGRADES UNDERSTANDS** that all hospitals have faced extraordinary circumstances in recent months and we salute all hospitals and health systems for their remarkable patient care efforts. To shed light on the hard work and dedication of all hospitals and care teams, we asked several 2020 award recipients to share their experience and reflect on their efforts to maintain a high standard of patient care during the COVID-19 crisis.





# Peninsula Regional Medical Center

**P**eninsula Regional Medical Center (PRMC) is a 266-bed hospital on Maryland's Eastern Shore, also known as the Delmarva Peninsula (Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia). It's part of the Peninsula Regional Health System, which also includes Nanticoke Memorial Hospital and the McCready Pavilion. Despite being in a resort area, PRMC experienced a surge of COVID-19 cases, primarily related to outbreaks among workers from a local poultry processing facility. Many of the workers share housing with multiple families.

To add capacity in case of a COVID-19 surge, PRMC converted a vacant pediatric unit next to the ED to an 8-bed ICU and a conference center into a 44-bed ICU. To minimize the trauma of patients coming off of ventilators seeing other ventilated patients all around them, nurses improvised by building dividers with PVC pipes and black Hefty bags. The makeshift dividers are easily positioned near patients who are waking up.

Like many hospitals, care teams experimented with proning, which makes it easier for COVID-19 patients to breathe and can reduce dependence on ventilators. At one point, PRMC had 18 ventilator patients prone for 12 hours out of 24. Despite the clear benefits of proning, it created issues with ET tubes and cannula, and flipping ventilated patients in particular created pressure ulcers unlike anything care teams had ever seen. Again, nurses stepped up to care for these patients, using nasal packing to change dressings on the fly.

PRMC also adapted its care transition and discharge processes to prevent the virus from spreading throughout the community. With only one nursing home willing to accept COVID-19 patients, discharge planners had to vastly increase communication with home health or family caregivers. For patients who were independent but could not self-quarantine for 14 days, the hospital worked with a local college to use its dorm while the school is closed, with oversight by nonclinical staff.



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*“ When COVID-19 first arrived, I was admitting in the ER and had no idea what I was looking at. I’m a hospitalist who has been in practice for 25 years. I felt like a first-year med student. ”*

**Dr. Chris Snyder, DO**

Chief Quality Officer  
Peninsula Regional Medical Center

# Cone Health System

Cone Health System is a six-hospital system based in Greensboro, NC. To date it has only cared for a maximum of 60 COVID-19 patients at a time, but the 1,200 bed system nonetheless planned for far more. One clear advantage: Cone Health had just closed a hospital that was replaced by a new facility and was able to reopen the empty hospital for COVID-19 patients only.

Even so, at one point CAUTIs and CLABSIs in COVID-19 patients started to rise. The infection control team determined that clinicians' PPE was getting in the way. They improvised new ways to manage the lines, and infection rates returned to normal levels.

One of the best things Cone Health did during the pandemic was communicate — internally, to patients, their families, and the community. Dr. Swords and other leaders interacted regularly with

local news media and appeared on TV three times a week. Because of the dedicated hospital, leaders were able to reassure the community that all of their other hospitals were 100% COVID-19 free and that emergent cases should not stay away.

The zero-visitation policy during the pandemic also drove home the importance of communicating with family members during care transitions. To make sure the right people got the right information, Cone Health dedicated two negative pressure rooms for discharge conversations involving the patient, doctors, and nurses. Family members were outfitted with full PPE for a 20-minute meeting immediately before discharge, or via telehealth. All information was made available via the patient portal, with clear instructions for how to access it. Instead of many disjointed conversations around discharge, there is now one coordinated meeting with everyone on the same page.



*“ Today, more than ever, we appreciate the importance of preventing infections, of taking the right steps to avoid spreading germs, and of keeping patients safe. Hospitals are redoubling efforts to keep patients safe by increasing the use of UV robots, cleaning more areas more often and configuring waiting areas to accommodate social distancing. It could be a silver lining that by taking the steps to lower the risk of COVID-19 we have fewer healthcare associated infections of all types going forward.”*

**Bruce Swords, MD, PhD**  
Chief Physician Executive  
Cone Health System

# Hackensack Meridian Jersey Shore University Medical Center

**H**ackensack Meridian Jersey Shore University Medical Center is a 630-bed academic medical center based in Neptune, NJ. In 2016 the organization began its journey to become a high reliability organization (HRO), a term that originated in the airline industry and is now used in healthcare to decrease harm. That same year, Hackensack University Health Network merged with Meridian Health System, creating a team 34,000 members strong that set the gold standard for healthcare in New Jersey.

As part of its journey to zero harm, Hackensack Meridian Health facilities had to shift their culture. It was a significant undertaking to educate the entire team — both clinicians and non-clinicians — on HRO principles. Key among those principles: No matter what your title is, anyone can “stop the line” when advocating for patient care, without fear of retaliation.

New Jersey was hit hard by COVID-19 and being part of an HRO culture helped prepare their teams to meet and take COVID-19 head on. Confidence in knowing they were

providing the best patient care possible helped clinicians through the most difficult times, even as they fought a little-understood virus.

Hackensack Meridian Health was extremely aggressive in protecting team members and patients during the pandemic. The health system’s infrastructure was critical to securing and deploying PPE, ventilators, and other equipment to hospitals and other facilities in the network, especially the smaller ones. To adapt to the crisis, clinicians had to deviate from some HRO standards for putting in central lines. Standard practice is to have an observer in the room during a central line insertion. To conserve PPE and protect people, they did not have an observer present at the bedside in every case. With the worst hopefully behind them, teams are getting back to basics, such as team member huddles and patient safety rounds.



Hackensack  
Meridian Health

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*“ We can’t take our foot off the gas pedal when it comes to quality and patient safety. Whatever your baseline is today, you can be better tomorrow.”*

**Kenneth N. Sable, MD, MBA, FACEP**  
Regional President, Southern Market  
Hackensack Meridian Health



# West Jefferson Medical Center

**W**est Jefferson Medical Center is a 419-bed community hospital just outside New Orleans that remained committed to patient safety and service excellence throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Infection Prevention team members and the CMO rounded daily to provide the latest CDC updates. COVID-19 patients were cohorted to two units, with a PPE czar outside of the unit 24/7 to ensure appropriate PPE and hand hygiene procedures were followed upon entrance and exit. To better manage alarms and other controls, staff used extension tubing so pumps could be placed outside of patient rooms.

The hospital was diligent in keeping patients and employees safe, taking extra measures to ensure staff had appropriate and available PPE. The senior administration team rounded daily to answer questions and deliver PPE, even creating videos to demonstrate how to don and doff PPE, which were named best practices throughout the region.

West Jefferson Medical Center deployed iPads® to the units so staff could help patients use FaceTime® to connect with their families, since no visitors were allowed. This helped alleviate feelings of isolation and separation anxiety that some patients experienced. iPads were also used by physicians for telemedicine at the bedside and within our clinics so they could continue to address community healthcare needs. Clinicians and staff celebrated with overhead jingles each time a COVID-19 patient was discharged, which was well received by patients and their families, who eagerly awaited their reunion.



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*“ No matter what curveball life throws our way — whether it’s a hurricane or a worldwide pandemic — West Jefferson Medical Center is committed to the healthcare needs of our community.”*

**Darlene Gondrella**

Vice President, Quality and Service Excellence  
West Jefferson Medical Center

# White Plains Hospital



**W**hite Plains Hospital is a 292-bed hospital in Westchester County, NY, approximately 30 miles north of Manhattan. Similar to other hospitals, the outbreak of COVID-19 led to many necessary but sometimes difficult measures at the hospital. The need to restrict visitors left patients feeling isolated and family members in the dark.

To provide comfort, staff loaned their iPads and other mobile devices to patients so they could communicate with their loved ones. Being able to communicate with friends and family they feared they would never see again brought smiles and tears of happiness to patients' faces — and staff members' too. Upon hearing about this effort, community members donated 35 more iPads, which facilitated almost 450 chat sessions. They ranged from saying hello to singing "Happy Birthday" to giving final goodbyes.

After seeing the impact of the video chats, White Plains Hospital wanted to make sure patients would feel as loved as possible in their final hours. Staff played patients'

favorite songs, along with calming music, guided meditation, and recordings of family voices encouraging patients to stay strong. They also read prayers and countless favorite stories in the patient's native tongue, thanks to the hospital's interpreter network. For COVID-19 positive mothers unable to see their newborn baby, staff took pictures and shared them with family to reassure them the baby was doing well.

Thanks to these efforts, patients who had once felt defeated became more involved in their care and less anxious about not seeing their family. They fought harder to survive, and many went home! Of course, many patients did not survive. But thanks to staff and community efforts, they knew they were loved, and families received some closure.



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*“ Thanks to our staff’s focus on improving the patient experience, and the generosity of the community, patients fought harder to beat COVID-19 and many of them were able to return home to their loved ones. ”*

**Michael Gelormino**  
Director of Communications  
White Plains Hospital

# MaineGeneral Health

**M**aineGeneral Health is a two-campus non-profit system based in Augusta, ME. Since Day One of the COVID-19 crisis, the organization has taken an all-hands-on-deck approach to best serve its patients and their families – and to support each other. That has meant redeploying staff to critical areas to strengthen the pandemic response across departments and communicating daily with staff and the community about what MaineGeneral is doing.

Throughout the health crisis, staff have never lost focus on providing the best care to every patient, every time. Leaders have made every effort to give staff additional support and help them balance work, family, and their own fears. Employees have been recognized by community members for giving excellent service and maintaining their dedication to what MaineGeneral calls "Excellence at Work."

After a recent emergency department visit, one patient wrote this: "I will always come back to your hospital. Thank you for taking very good care of me. All staff – from those in the COVID-19 tent outside to the examining room, down to when I left – respected me and showed me dignity. All the workers there were five-star, all the way. Thank you."



*“ Our employees have stepped forward to make sure we’re taking care of our community and each other. They are true heroes.”*

**Chuck Hays**

President and CEO  
MaineGeneral Health

# PIH Health



**P**IH Health is a nonprofit, regional healthcare network with two hospitals and multiple services. Based in Whittier, CA, the organization serves more than two million residents in Los Angeles and Orange Counties and throughout the San Gabriel Valley.

To keep the community informed during the pandemic, PIH Health provided community health officials with COVID-19 case volume and count information. The organization also provided as much remote care as possible. For example, pregnancies don't pause for a pandemic. PIH Health supported expectant mothers using telemedicine to limit exposure risk, scheduling in-person visits only when needed. Delivery timing didn't change due to COVID-19, but the length of hospital stays decreased as PIH worked to get patients home as soon as safely possible.

Despite the potential for COVID-19 to be a serious malady in certain people, its presence hasn't made every other serious disease or condition disappear. Like their colleagues nationwide, PIH Health clinicians are now seeing patients who delayed care they desperately needed. Instead of treating patients when they first experience symptoms, clinicians are seeing patients with late-stage diseases. To raise awareness and allay fear, Chief Medical Officer Dr. Jaime Diaz wrote an op-ed in the local paper: "We hope the virus curve is flattened soon and that a vaccine is just around the corner. But we also hope that the American public will stop letting fear of COVID-19 prevent them from coming to hospitals for the care they need, when they need it."



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*“ We have a ‘Patients First’ culture at PIH Health. This commitment to our patients’ safety and well-being has continued to be the driving force as we worked together to face this challenging pandemic. The unwavering dedication of all our employees, medical staff, and volunteers, and the support of our communities has bolstered our resolve and led us to take significant steps to maximize safety within all of our facilities, as well as provide timely and transparent communications to keep our communities apprised throughout the current crisis. The health of our communities is as important as ever, and PIH Health is proud to continue to provide outstanding care. ”*

**James R. West**

President and CEO  
PIH Health



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