

June 19, 2020

Team Members,

Our on-going battle against COVID-19 intensified this week. Nearly every component of our health system saw a meaningful surge in COVID-19 related activity. Our two COVID-19 dedicated inpatient critical care units (2300 and 3100) experienced a dramatic increase in the both the number and acuity of patients, with census nearing 75% of capacity. Our screening centers saw a daily average of 320 patients, with staff being presented the additional challenge of having to conduct those screenings in full PPE in the heat of early summer. Our supply chain became challenged as precious in-house rapid test kits were utilized faster than that inventory could be replaced. Our call center volumes set new records almost daily with more than 900 calls this week. Not unexpectedly in light of these volumes, the positivity rate of those patients who received testing over the past five days exceeded 14%. The increased demand for testing also resulted in an increase in the average number of pending lab results which approached 900 daily. The increase in the community positivity rate places greater demand on our navigation team to call an ever-increasing number of patients with results and conduct lengthy discussions concerning quarantine and symptom monitoring. In short, this week has been marked by increasing anxiety and challenges.

I had the opportunity to round last weekend in the hospital. I am grateful to have this opportunity as it affords me a chance to interact with the dedicated and devoted frontline workers who deliver the health care part of the Washington Regional mission. Those team members I encountered were the screeners at the hospital entryway, staff at our screening center, the Emergency Department, Critical Care Units, and Med/Surg floors. I was encouraged by their positive attitudes and their active demonstration of the ideals underlying our mission statement. We often talk about our mission and values. To see our staff embodying those ideals is inspiring.

The first part of this week, I rounded on our two COVID-19 units with our nursing leadership and talent development team. We were delivering Gatorade and healthy snacks to our team members who are facing the brunt of increasing numbers of seriously ill patients. I was not prepared for what I experienced. My first conversation was with a critical care nurse concerned for his family and their financial wellbeing as a result of this crisis. He was thankful to have a job. My next conversation was with two critical care nurses who shared the particular challenge of having to deliver news of a patient's death to loved ones, the language barrier, and the strain in trying to communicate that the loved one was not simply asleep. A respiratory therapist shared with me her activity app results that stated by late afternoon she had already logged 28,000 steps. Hospitalists and intensivists commented that the care of a typical COVID-19 patient required three times the amount of time required for a normal critical care patient. There were no visitors, no guests, just our teammates providing professional and compassionate care through grit and determination, all in the face of a virus about which much remains unknown. Our staff truly are heroes.

When I returned to the quiet of my office and reflected, I was overcome with conflicting emotions. I was extremely proud of and encouraged by the staff I had met, but at the same moment weighed by the anxiety I suspect we all feel as this virus surges in our community. While I try to reassure each of you and truly believe that "we've got this", there is often in the pit of my stomach the fear of the unknown, how high is the hill we have yet to climb? That very evening, Cheyenne, one of those brave, determined nurses I talked with earlier that day, shared this post:



To the people who think Covid is not real, or isn't "serious", I just want to let you know it is very real and very serious. I spent the day comforting my dying patient, so they would know they weren't alone. This patient, who was perfectly fine 6 days ago. This patient who didn't have underlying health conditions. This patient who now is not perfectly fine. Covid doesn't care about your age, your gender, where you are from, or what ethnicity you are. If you have lived a good healthy life, or you haven't, it doesn't matter. It can affect anyone. So be safe and be mindful. Wear your mask, if not for yourself do it for others.

I wept, but then became inspired. A Winston Churchill quote regarding the foolishness of trying to predict the future at the expense of focusing on the task at hand came to mind: *It is a mistake to try to look too far ahead. The chain of destiny can only be grasped one link at a time.* From the dedication exhibited by our teammates that I encountered while on rounds, to Cheyenne's wrenching plea to our community, I confirmed once more that Washington Regional and its people each day bring the focused commitment to the mission and support for one another that will ensure that Washington Regional and our community successfully weather this pandemic.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Larry Shackelford".

J. Larry Shackelford
President and CEO
Washington Regional Medical System