



It takes a community to heal

by Scott Kelly, Monday, June 15th 2020

There is no doubt that as a community we're facing a difficult time. And together we'll face this challenge and succeed.

Asante's devotion to our community is not new; it's at the core of our mission, vision and values. Like the thousands of people who live here, we're proud to call Southern Oregon home.

This pandemic has brought us closer as a community, and never before have I seen such heartfelt gratitude. From messages of encouragement to donations of personal protective equipment and meals, our employees truly appreciate knowing our neighbors are cheering us on as we care for those affected by this pandemic as well as our community's other medical needs.

Ensuring the safety of patients, employees and health care providers remains a priority. Leadership teams from across Asante's health system have leveraged their extensive expertise to implement a coordinated response to COVID-19.

Internally, the teams ensure appropriate procedures for safety and medical care are followed, coordinate sufficient staffing levels, and secure adequate personal protective equipment such as masks, gowns and gloves.

Our PPE is sourced from regular and new supply lines, as well as from community partners who have donated to Asante. The donated items have provided Asante with a buffer to help ensure our caregivers and patients will be safe through an extreme surge in patients.

"The donations of masks have been especially helpful to protect our visitors and staff as we begin to reopen services," said Brian Murphy, director of Asante

Materials Management. "From 3-D printed face shields to hand-sewn masks and gowns, we are incredibly grateful and thankful to the Southern Oregon community for its innovation, creativity and generosity."

Externally, teams have focused on helping prepare our region. We've been extensively collaborating with public health officials, business merchants, civic organizations and government representatives from local, state and federal agencies. These partnerships, particularly the local ones, have helped our region successfully navigate the pandemic and prepare all of us to move forward through the governor's reopening phases.

During the recovery process and beyond, the way health care is delivered is changing. Right now, it's common for people to see their doctor virtually; that is, through a video visit from their home computer or mobile device rather than in person.

"In many instances a video visit makes good sense," said Dr. Lee Shapley, vice president of medical affairs at Ashland Community Hospital. "For example, someone with flu symptoms can see their medical provider virtually, avoiding a trip to the doctor's office or urgent care clinic and reducing the risk of spreading the illness to others. The demand for telehealth will likely continue long after COVID-19 has diminished."

Another trend Asante and other health systems are seeing — one that is not positive — is fewer people are coming to the emergency department with serious or urgent medical concerns. People with symptoms of a heart attack or stroke may be waiting too long to seek care out of fear of contracting COVID-19.

Asante addressed this concern early on by implementing several safety precautions, including limiting the number of visitors, screening everyone who enters the hospital, requiring masks in public areas, and separating people with COVID-related symptoms to areas away from others seeking medical and emergency care.

"It's imperative for people who think they're having a medical emergency to call 911 or go directly to an emergency department," Dr. Shapley said.

The financial impact of the pandemic is extensive in our community, with many families, individuals and businesses hit hard by lost income, wages and health insurance. An increased demand on limited state funds through the Oregon Health Plan, along with declines in commercial insurance, will further affect the financial stability of health systems across the state. Asante remains resilient and is committed to helping the community recover.

Recovery includes moving forward on Asante's planned projects such as the regional cancer center in Medford. This project and others mean added jobs, wages and purchased supplies and services within the local economy. The goal is to ensure the people in the communities that Asante serves have access to the medical care they need, close to home.

Scott Kelly is president and CEO of Asante.