Staff across every department and unit have gone above and beyond every day to ensure operations continue to run smoothly despite COVID-related challenges — from the clinicians working around the clock on the front lines, to the Food & Nutrition team ensuring staff stay fueled for the fight, to the lab professionals testing specimens, and every essential health care worker in between. Some employees have even taken on new responsibilities outside of their typical jobs, such as the Perioperative nurses, surgical technicians, and medical assistants performing thermal screenings at hospital entrances, while others have even been redeployed to support the health system’s mounting needs, like pharmacy technician Valbona Tartini, CPPT, and pharmacists Amanda Ridley, PharmD, and Shadaria Shuler, PharmD, who are prepping compounded sterile products to support Penn Home Infusion as they treat more patients outside of the hospital.

“If you think about the culture of Pennsy and our long history of being the first to evolve, to change, to flex, to respond, our role in coping with the influx of patients, and our long history of being the first to respond to an epidemic, that is what you need. You need these words to resonate with the staff.”

But while there has been a lot of talk on social media and in the news about health care professionals being heroes, PAH leaders understand that these words are empty unless the skilled staff who are putting their own safety at risk receive the support they need. PAH’s Healthcare Heroes campaign, spearheaded by Debi Ferrarello, MSN, RN, IBCLC, NE-BC, director of Parent Education/Lactation and interim director of Programs Development for the Women’s Health Service Line, aims to do just that.

“This is such a stressful time. Some people have a family member who lost their job, some are directly caring for severely ill patients, and some are trying to homeschool their kids. And many of the things that they used to do to cope, they can’t do anymore,” Ferrarello said. “For me, it helps be a part of the healing, so I’ve focused on finding ways to meet the tangible and emotional needs of our staff.” To boost morale and demonstrate that every employee is valued, clinical and non-clinical staff have been invited to stop by the Healthcare Heroes selfie station and share why they “put on their caps” each day. The photos are posted to the Pennsy Pride & Gratitude Board, which also has a section for cards, drawings, and other tokens of thanks from the community. Wellness resources like virtual support groups and mindfulness sessions are also regularly posted to the Care for the Care Provider intranet site and shared via email.

Ferrarello also partnered with Pantry Insachers, DSW, MBA, administrator of the Behavioral Health Service Line, and Carolyn Tobin, director of Food & Nutrition and Environmental Services, to establish the Pennsy Pantry. The pantry aims to relieve stress in an overwhelming time for staff whose families are suffering financial hardships as a result of the pandemic and are struggling to put food on the table. Employees can place non-perishable foods and gift cards in the donation bins across PAH’s campus, which Tobin’s team then deliver to Hall-Mercer Community Mental Health Center. Insachers and her team wipe down each item and bag the donations, aiming to include a breakfast, lunch, and dinner in each, and regularly restock.

“On the first day, 113 employees in need picked up groceries,” Insacher said. “There are a lot of wonderful organizations and restaurants donating food, but the pantry truly is a ‘Pennsy for Pennsy’ effort.”

The pantry has received an outpouring of support. Cardiology nurse Brian Degnan, RN, took the spirit of giving up a notch when he pledged to match his coworkers’ donations. When they collected 1,900 in less than 24 hours, Degnan kept his promise and shopped for a whopping $1,400 worth of groceries for his colleagues and their families. The Intensive Care Nursery and Mother Baby Unit followed his example, collecting more than $1,000 each, and many other teams and individuals have been similarly generous.

While the pandemic has introduced so much uncertainty, at the week’s end we see, it is clear that the Healthcare Heroes campaign will not only honor the masked medical heroes valiantly saving patients, but it will also continue to inspire acts of everyday heroism among members of the PAH community.
INTRODUCING PENNSY’S INFECTION INVESTIGATORS

PAH is stringently screening temperatures, restricting visitor access, requiring proper personal protective equipment, and cleaning and disinfecting in order to flatten the curve — but what happens when coronavirus exposures occur? Well, then it’s time to call in the SWAT team.

At the end of March, Stefanie Coombs, BSN, RN, CNIV, Allyson Dulceomear, BSNS, RN, and Shawn McBride, MBA, BSN, RN, and nurses in the Tuttleman Center’s ambulatory surgery center were invited to serve as members of the newly launched Exposure SWAT Team (EST). Working with Infection Prevention and Occupational Health, the EST aims to identify, track, and manage employee exposures.

After receiving a report of a possible exposure, an EST member is assigned to collect information from the employee’s supervisor and engage in contact tracing. After interviewing the employee over the phone, as well as anyone they came into contact with, they determine whether the employee is deemed low, medium, or high-risk. This informs what actions they must take before they can safely return to work.

“Whenever we think we’ve seen it all, a new scenario pops up. An algorithm guides us in classifying risk, but if there are unique circumstances, Dr. Onyeka Nwankwo [chair of the Infection Prevention Committee] is always a great help,” McBride said. “Really, everyone has been helpful. Given the current circumstances, it’s a lot to ask staff to provide all of this information, but everyone has been so receptive.”

The EST works seven days a week and follows up with every report within 24 hours, expediting these diligent investigators to work efficiently.

By the first week of May, they had already conducted more than 660 interviews. “It’s a lot of work, but I feel really fortunate to be a part of this process,” Jennings said. “It has been a great learning experience, and I appreciate the opportunity to work with all of these other teams.”

Coombs echoed this, adding, “At Tuttleman, we were removed from everything going on with COVID-19. Now, we’re in constant communication with employees who are on the front lines. Protecting them as a SWAT Team member has made me feel like I’m contributing and doing meaningful work.”

A RETIREMENT TO REMEMBER

Last month, Pennsy said a fond farewell to Debra Runyan, MT(ASCP), CIC, who retired after 34 exceptional years of service.

Runyan began her PAH journey as a microbiology technician in 1986, later utilizing her unique skill set to lead and eliminate hospital-acquired infections as an infection prevention specialist. She was named director of Infection Prevention in 2008 and led the hospital to decrease infections by as much as 30 percent each year, improving patient outcomes and reducing costs. Her unwavering determination to promote best practices related to hand hygiene, personal protective equipment usage, and exposure management proved imitable and undoubtedly informed Pennsy’s strategic response to COVID-19.

While saying goodbye to such a valuable member of the PAH community would typically include a party with plenty of cake and hugs, the pandemic forced Runyan’s colleagues to get creative — a challenge they certainly didn’t back down from! On May 1, a surprise retirement parade drove past her New Jersey home honking horns, ringing cowbells, holding handmade signs, showering congratulations, and leaving gifts from a socially acceptable distance — including a crystal vase commemorating her long-standing commitment to quality and patient safety from Dan Feinberg, MD, chief medical officer, and the Performance Improvement Team.

“It has been my pleasure to work with Deb over the past 7 years. While she’ll be missed by all of us, I know that she’ll wholeheartedly embrace all of the new opportunities retirement brings,” said Deborah Christopher, MSN, RN, CPHQ, clinical director for Quality and Patient Safety and organizer of the parade. “Her hard work and diligence have greatly benefited our hospital, and I know our staff will strive to follow her stellar example.”

WHAT’S NEW

Choosing faith over fear on the front lines

Long before ventilators were making headlines, respiratory therapists like Pennsly Hospital’s Roy Beatty were working tirelessly to help patients breathe comfortably and independently. Throughout his 39-year career, Beatty has weaned innumerable patients off ventilators and watched them recover, and as offered compassionate end-of-life care. When reflecting on these ups and downs, Beatty candidly notes that he has “never felt as mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted” as he has been during the COVID-19 crisis. Still, he remains deeply committed to providing lifescare for patients and serving as a leader and a beloved “Work Dad” for his colleagues.

Recalling a Christmas gift that he received from a patient that reads, ‘Never let your fear be greater than your faith,’ Beatty enters each day clad in PPE and prepared to do everything in his power to keep his peers from being exposed to the coronavirus. He collaborates with doctors, residents, and nurses to provide the intensive care that Pennsy’s COVID-positive patients require — checking pulse ox levels, inserting nasal canulas, monitoring intubated patients, and gently pruning patients (ripping them onto their stomachs) to improve their breathing — all while frequently taking inventory to know what equipment is available for the next arrival.

“Everything has changed, but I’m proud of the people I work with. We’re family, and we’re on the front lines and down in the trenches together,” he said. “I’m actually up for retirement, but I’m still here, and I’d never shirk this responsibility. This is my calling.”