Welcome a new addition to the family can pose a challenge in the time of coronavirus, as hospitals maintain visitor restrictions and other necessary precautions to protect patients and staff. Yet one growing family came up with a joyful, responsible way to celebrate its newest member — Aiden Erik Eikrem, who was born Friday, April 17, at Princeton Medical Center (PMC). Two days later, Aiden was in PMC’s Mother-Baby Unit with his mother and father, Kristina and Leif Eikrem of Princeton, when a nurse coaxed the family to their window. Surprise! Six floors below, more than 20 members of their extended family — spanning generations, all masked and doing their best to maintain appropriate physical distancing — held up cardboard signs spelling out AIDEN ERIK EIKREM.

When they flipped their signs, the message changed to THANK YOU NURSES & DOCTORS!

Lori Sletta, RN, a clinical informatics coordinator and credentialed educator at PMC who also happens to be the aunt and godmother of Kristina Eikrem, collaborated with Heather Pozzolano, RN, to set up the moment. Pozzolano and her colleagues on Mother-Baby signaled the family members below by placing a large arrow, visible from ground level, in the window of the room next-door to the Eikrems. Then, the Mother-Baby staff just needed to get the first-time parents to check out the view from their own window.

In a follow-up email to Cheryl Raymond, RN, nurse manager of Mother-Baby, Sletta wrote, "Thank you for allowing us to make the new Eikrem family feel a bit special and giving us the opportunity to thank your wonderful staff!"

With lights flashing and music playing, first responders from throughout central New Jersey visited PMC to honor healthcare heroes on Saturday, April 11. The procession, which included more than 40 police, fire, and rescue vehicles, encircled the campus before coming to a stop outside the Schreyer Education Center. The first responders — including some dressed as superheroes — applauded staff as they arrived at work or left for the evening, holding up signs of admiration. The first responders brought dozens of pizzas which were given to the staff. The event ended at sunset with the American flag raised on a firetruck ladder and a flyover by the New Jersey State Police helicopter.
Now more than ever we understand the need for the community to come together to support one another, especially our front-line defense in this battle against COVID-19. The Nassau Inn is honored to offer support to the healthcare workers at Penn Medicine Princeton Health hospital the only way we know how. Whether the medical professionals are here from out of town to help the fight or just need a safe place to catch up on sleep and shower between shifts, we are here for them. We hope they will continue to accept this small token of gratitude for all they are doing to care for our community and keep us safe.

— Lori Rabon, vice president of Palmer Square and Nassau Inn

For employees and physicians treating COVID-19 patients at Princeton Medical Center (PMC), the Nassau Inn’s pledge of free lodging has been invaluable. Hospital staff and physicians often work extended hours during the COVID-19 outbreak. The shifts can be difficult, and there is still much uncertainty about the virus.

Gladine Mitchell, a nursing assistant in PMC’s Acute Care of the Elderly Unit, said having to commute home to Philadelphia every day would have been unmanageable. Long shifts at the hospital with long round trips in between posed a concern, but a bigger issue was the health of her children, including a son who has a weakened immune system.

“The hotel’s offer allowed me to keep my family safe while still being able to provide for my sons,” Mitchell said. “Otherwise, I couldn’t possibly afford the costs or the risks.”

Mitchell is among 60 Princeton Health employees and providers who stayed a combined 971 nights at the Nassau Inn in April and May. The staff members received free rooms and parking.

Bijal Patel, RN, is one of several staffers from PMC’s Llura and Gordon Gudel Center for Critical Care who spent nights at the hotel.

“We feel blessed that the Nassau Inn provided us with one less thing to worry about,” she said. “The staff has been nothing but welcoming, and we are truly grateful.”

Michelle Dassa, RN, a staff member of the Medical-Neurology-Oncology Unit, said staying at the hotel instead of returning home was a difficult but necessary choice to prevent possibly exposing her parents — who are older and have health issues — to COVID-19.

“Before, I was going home, stripping in the garage and running into the shower,” Dassa said. “Now after a long day I can go back to my lovely and comfortable room, try to de-stress and get ready for the next day.”

The COVID-19 outbreak resulted in a surge of patients who needed critical care, said Tobe Fisch, MD, Princeton Health’s chief medical information officer. Princeton Health physicians from other disciplines — including anesthesiologists, pulmonologists, and internists like Fisch — stepped up to assist. The offer of free lodging helped reassure volunteers.

“Knowing that I could have a hotel room allowed me to participate in inpatient care without having to worry about bringing home an infection to any family members who might be at increased risk,” Dr. Fisch said. “I and other healthcare providers on the medical staff here are very grateful to the Nassau Inn for their unstinting generosity.”

O’Neil Simpson, who works in Surgical Services, said he stayed at the hotel to make sure he did not inadvertently expose his two young daughters to the virus.

“I had peace of mind knowing that they are safe,” Simpson said. “The separation was difficult but understood.”

“Thank you so much to all of the hotel staff,” said Jessica Huggers, a registered respiratory therapist (RRT) at the hospital.

“We really appreciate you all going above and beyond during these difficult times.”

For more information on new or modified programs at Princeton Health, visit www.princetonhcs.org/calendar or search the keyword virtual.