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## At jammed San Fernando Valley hospital, staff strives to stay focused amid torrent of COVID

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Medical workers prepare to manually prone a COVID-19 patient in an intensive care unit at Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in the Mission Hills section of Los Angeles, Tuesday, Dec. 22, 2020. UC Irvine has unveiled a free, online tool to help health care pros predict which patients might be safely sent home, and which might need the most critical care. Reliable prediction of disease severity is essential, and may lead to better patient outcomes, researchers said. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

By **ELIZABETH CHOU** | [hchou@scng.com](mailto:hchou@scng.com) | Daily News

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At one hospital in the northeast San Fernando Valley, where there were more than 170 patients sick with coronavirus this week, healthcare workers and hospitals officials say they have been stretched to previously unimaginable levels.

“We thought we were maxed out” when Los Angeles County’s first surge of COVID-19 cases hit in April and May, said Elizabeth Chow, the executive nurse of Providence Holy Cross Medical Center’s critical care units.

They reached a peak of around 60 patients at that time. “We thought we could never do more than that,” Chow said.



Physical therapist Alireza Akbarpour, right, helps Maria Herrera exercise in a COVID-19 unit at Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in the Mission Hills section of Los Angeles, Tuesday, Dec. 22, 2020. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

With the number of COVID-19 patients nearly tripled, and as a potential Christmas holiday surge is expected to arrive, what was once unimaginable is now “our new normal,” she said.

A mix of calm and a sense of terror about the future has reigned at the hospital over the past several weeks, as cases skyrocketed from about 20 or so COVID-19 patients right before Thanksgiving to the current level.

Christmas Day flew by almost unnoticed by hospital staff, and paramedics transporting stroke and heart attack patients were told to go to other hospitals instead.

Meanwhile, Holy Cross has surged well beyond their normal 24-bed ICU capacity, expanding those units to provide intensive care to 40 people, around half of them sick with COVID-19.

Going into the New Year’s weekend, the hospital was reporting it was 97% full.

Dr. Bernard Klein, chief executive of the 300-plus bed Mission Hills hospital, said they serve a predominantly Latino community that has seen a greater number of people getting sick with COVID-19.

Many of the people in these communities are essential workers who cannot shelter at home, and their risk is increased as well because they live in “close quarters” with family members, he explained.

Latinos continue to be disproportionately represented among those who die from COVID-19, county officials said Wednesday.

Klein said that unless the general public takes a noticeable and collective step to shelter at home, the positivity rates they have monitored for their surrounding northeast San Fernando neighborhoods do not seem to bode well for the next few weeks.





Respiratory therapist Paul Knaack, left, and Dr. Mher Onyanan check on a COVID-19 patient in an intensive care unit at Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in the Mission Hills section of Los Angeles, Tuesday, Dec. 22, 2020. UC Irvine has unveiled a free, online tool to help health care pros predict which patients might be safely sent home, and which ones might need the most critical care. Reliable prediction of disease severity is essential and may lead to better patient outcomes, researchers said. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

“At this point, our fear is this (positivity) number will continue to increase,” he said, “and then you add New Year’s, and there’s a big fear that we could get another surge upon this one.”

At Holy Cross, they have seen the number of COVID-19 patients shoot up in shocking fashion, potentially as the result of families and friends gathering for a procession of fall and winter holidays.

In early November, their hospital reported around 20 cases, and by Thanksgiving the cases were in the 40s. That then doubled to more than 80 cases two weeks later.

As of Tuesday, the hospital was caring for 171 COVID-19 patients, the highest number they have cared for thus far in the pandemic, Klein said.

And yet, the atmosphere among staff is calmer this time than in the first surge, despite the astronomical numbers, Chow observed in an interview Tuesday.

The calm, driven by greater experience among staff on what to expect and what to do, also is accompanied by what Chow said were feelings of pain, fear and devastation at losing patients.

“We’re all terrified that people did that again over Christmas and we’ll get the surge upon a surge that everyone’s talking about,” Chow said, after contending with the surge that likely resulted from people gathering for the Thanksgiving holiday.





Dr. Mher Onanyan takes a short break while waiting for an X-ray of a COVID-19 patient's lungs at Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in the Mission Hills section of Los Angeles, Tuesday, Dec. 22, 2020. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

Conditions continue to worsen countywide. The death toll in Los Angeles County is now 10,056 since the pandemic began. About 150 people are dying per day in the county, said Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer.

"There's so much more death than we've ever seen before," Chow said. "Our patients with COVID are very sick. Lots of them die after very long stays with us. And, you know, we've become so attached to them because we're their friends, their family and their health care providers."

Klein says nursing homes and dialysis centers are two "big areas" they are working with the county and the state to help free up some space at hospitals such as theirs.

Both types of facilities are limited in their ability to take on COVID-19 patients, which has necessitated that some people stay in the hospital.

But whether they can overcome these challenges remains to be seen, Klein said, as such efforts are still "works in progress."

As they seek out additional space, Klein said they face the reality that the lack of space has become so dire — as the number of cases have skyrocketed over a short period — that a sister-hospital in Apple Valley has begun treating patients in their lobby.

At that hospital, St. Mary Medical Center, creative measures were taken to set up a wall partitioning a no-longer used lobby.

If the trend continues, hospital staff may need to make decisions about whether to provide care to some, and not others. Hospital officials have already begun discussing how to ration care, he said.





Registered nurse Melanie LaMadrid, left, talks on the phone as one of her patients lies in a bed in a COVID-19 unit at Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in the Mission Hills section of Los Angeles, Tuesday, Dec. 22, 2020. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

“We will reach the point where we will not be able to provide everything to everybody,” he said. “There just won’t be enough staff. There won’t be enough ventilators or other equipment, and I hope to God we never get to that point.”

The recent holiday weekend was the worst that nurses and other healthcare workers at Holy Cross has seen, according to chief nursing officer Jodi Hein.

Hein said she was on the phone with county officials for most of Christmas Day, discussing the need to redirect paramedics to other hospitals.

She emphasized the severity of the COVID-19 symptoms, saying that patients in the ICU are experiencing difficulty breathing, their oxygen levels low, and some experiencing signs of sepsis.

Many emergency room staff, who would normally be available for trauma patients, are now needed to care for people sick with COVID-19.

“(The patients) need our care ... very, very close monitoring by the ICU nurses,” Hein said. “Every 15 minutes the nurses are in there.”

Hein said hospital staff members are exhausted and part of what also attributes to that is the unpredictability of the illness.

“You can almost be ready for discharge, and then you crash,” she said. “You know, it just comes up on you when you think that the patient is ready to go home and then something happens.”

“It’s exhausting that way,” she said. “And then physically, it’s exhausting, because they’re picking up a lot of extra shifts to help us out because we’re very short.”

Advice to not gather for the holidays may not mean much for those who have no choice but to leave their home to work, and to live in close quarters with others.

Janet Marinaccio, president of a nonprofit that provides food assistance and other help to families in and around the northeast San Fernando Valley, said that people they serve are often in a tough bind when it comes to trying to stay safe from the virus.

“It is a vicious cycle,” she said. “Not only are they essential workers, work is essential to their family’s basic survival for so many, especially those MEND serves who often live far below the poverty line and work multiple jobs to barely make ends meet.”

Some stories they have heard include ones in which families wall off parts of their home to create makeshift isolation areas for family members who are sick or potentially exposed to someone who tested positive.





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“Clearly, it’s not ideal but they are trying to find a way to protect themselves and those in their community,” she said.

Maria Jimenez, who oversees MEND’s community ambassador program, said that nearly half of the 68 families who accessed food assistance at MEND from April until early December was sharing their household with another family. Ten of the 32 families living with another family were staying in an apartment, seven were in a house and six were staying with a relative or friend.

Hein, acknowledging this, offered what she could in terms of advice, saying that they have “a lot of families that have, you know, 10 relatives living together and they can’t really isolate.”

In those situations in which there are no separate rooms for people to isolate, “they can really do the best they can, which is, keep washing their hands, keep their mask on and keep, you know, at least 6 feet apart if they can,” she said.

Klein said that in order to respond to the surge, they have not only converted labs into in patient medical wards, but have also begun placing beds at the ends of their hallways.

Their hospital was at around 97% full, Klein said Tuesday. Holy Cross has 377 licensed beds, with around 345 of them available for adults.

Chow, who supervises the critical care team said the unimaginable thing now is the prospect of needing to care for another 10 to 20 patients. But with the numbers continuing to go up, hospital staff are already treating what is unimaginable as what may be inevitable.

“We’re just going to continue to try to take care of one patient at a time, one hour at a time, and take care of each other,” Chow said.

Nurses and other staff are exhausted, she said. And as hospital administrators issue bonuses to healthcare workers who volunteer to work extra hours, each week seems to bring at least one more hospital staffer who has tested positive for COVID-19 themselves, she said.

Amid all this, Klein said, it has been the teamwork among hospital staff at their facility, as well as others, that have held things together thus far.

Klein said just recently staff worked one afternoon to quickly convert an ICU area into a space for COVID-19 patients.

The labor-intensive work of safely moving patients needed to be done before staffing dropped off during the night. To get the job done, nurses, technicians and others who were not part of the ICU unit swooped in to help move patients. Klein described the moment as “powerful.”

“People who don’t even work in the ICU, who have nothing to do with the ICU, came together,” he said. “Everybody pitched in.”

And the work hit close to home recently when after a day in which a fellow healthcare worker, from a different organization, was among the several patients experiencing code blue, in which they were in immediate danger.



Chou said that she can still picture the nurses, clad in head coverings that would have been atypical in pre-COVID-19 times, and looking “so drawn and so exhausted,” as they responded to the worsening condition of the healthcare worker, now patient.

That moment still lingers in her mind, she said, “because it brought me such pain that my staff was so tired and working so hard.”

But she also noted the pride she felt, saying there was a sense of calm and resolve by the staff “getting down to business,” even through a time when many are feeling the urge to celebrate special occasions.

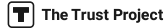
“The holidays went by, and we almost didn’t even notice,” she said. “You know, we just keep looking forward to next year. Next year, we will all gather. We will have a great celebration. For this year, it was just kind of a loss.”

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Elizabeth Chou has reported on Los Angeles City Hall government and politics since 2013, first with City News Service, and now the Los Angeles Daily News since the end of 2016. She grew up in the Los Angeles area, and is formerly a San Gabriel Valley girl. She now resides in the other Valley, and is enjoying exploring her new San Fernando environs. She previously worked at Eastern Group Publications, covering the cities of Montebello, Monterey Park, City of Commerce, and Vernon. She earned a BA degree in literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz.

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