

Castleberry takes new role helping COVID patients

BY CAROLE SHARWARKO
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In the Chronicle's April 2020 edition, we featured local health care workers who discussed how COVID affected their everyday work and home lives. Among them was Tiffany Victor Castleberry, a Flossmoor resident who worked as an administrator for University of Illinois Hospital.

After our article, Castleberry completed a doctorate of nursing degree and was recruited by Stanford Health Care in California to serve as Executive Director of Social Work and Case Management. We asked her to reflect on this transition and the nationwide health staffing shortage.

It might feel like the pandemic is going away, but hospitals continue to feel the weight of two years spent fighting COVID-19. In many instances, they're getting back on their feet while also managing high worker attrition, said Tiffany Victor Castleberry.

Castleberry speaks from her new vantage point as Executive Director

of Social Work and Case Management at Stanford Health Care in California, while also maintaining communication with administrators at Chicago-area hospital systems.

The health care landscape changed dramatically during COVID, she said, with the departure of many experienced, senior-level workers. People shouldn't be surprised, Castleberry said, and can't hold it against the workers who took early retirement or pivoted to other professions.

"There has definitely been a major shift in health care and the sustainability of the number of folks who are willing to stay, because of the pressure, variability and increased demands," she said.

"There hasn't been a day when there hasn't been an 'ask' added. How can we deliver great care, but exponentially better, with the same or less resources?"

In Castleberry's new role, she has been tasked with helping COVID-19 patients transition to long-term care or life at home. However, while a pa-



Tiffany Castleberry

tient may be well enough to be discharged, other issues may delay the process.

"So we ask ourselves, 'How the heck do we get these COVID patients out of the hospital?'" Castleberry said. "Many of them are uninsured, underinsured, or cannot be repatriated back to their homeland. Sometimes we're waiting for authorization of medication by insurance. If we have all these barriers to contend with, it's going to be a long stay."

If patients are discharged without proper support, they're more likely to end up back in the hospital. One major goal is to avoid this readmittance, so Castleberry's department manages ways to support patients' continuing recovery.

Though leaving Flossmoor was difficult, Castleberry said she enjoys using the expertise she developed in Chicago to benefit a new community.

"With my skillset and knowledge, I'm utilizing what I've done in Chicago to bring a different viewpoint to the work in California," she said. "It was a challenge to leave Flossmoor, though. We love Flossmoor and our friends there."

Flossmoor school nurse supports families during pandemic

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When the 2,500 students and 350 staff members of Flossmoor School District 161 shifted to remote learning at the start of the pandemic, Kathy Knawa's work never skipped a beat.

The district's supervising nurse continued her daily oversight, reminding kids to check their blood sugar and staying in touch with teachers about student attention issues, while conducting meetings for students with IEPs, or individualized education plans.

"All those things continued," Knawa said. "I continued to do my medical reviews and case histories, but did it from home instead of in the building. We still had students enrolling, health concerns and questions. None of that stopped."

In addition to her regular workload, Knawa managed the district's flow of COVID-19 information and updates from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Illinois Department of Public Health, and the Cook County Department of Public Health.



Carole Sharwarko/H-F Chronicle

Flossmoor schools nurse Kathy Knawa recently won a national nurse's award, presented here by District 161 Superintendent Dana Smith.

Knawa communicated data and recommendations to district administrators, and wrote weekly emails to update parents on constantly shifting guidance. The emails offered an informational lifeline for an anxious community looking for reliable infor-

mation, she said, helping to reinforce trust."

"Those weekly emails were really important," Knawa said. "No one expected we would be taken through this pandemic. But, how can we take care of this and get to the other side?"

When vaccinations became available in spring 2021, Knawa said the district tried to help families find sites and appointments, which were scarce in the earliest days. They even transported adults and children to vaccination sites when needed, she said.

As schools reopened in fall 2021, Knawa worked with the district's five other nurses, administration and community partners to set up a program of regular COVID-19 testing.

"We got SHIELD testing going as soon as we could," Knawa said. "Students and staff are tested every week and it's been very valuable. It's offered a lot of peace of mind for families and staff."

"A whole team is responsible for everything that took place. I was just part of a group of people who have worked on it. So much of this has been a team effort. I'm grateful to have support from the superintendent and di-

rector of student support services."

Knawa said she has created deep ties to the families she's served in her 21 years with the district. She doesn't work with a large staff like at a hospital, but they all take sincere ownership over the community.

"There are layers and layers of medical professionals in hospitals. In the school, it's me and a very small group of health care professionals," Knawa said. "The trust that people put in you and their respect is really important. I've gotten to know many of these families and I'm grateful for that. I'm grateful to be their school nurse."

With students back in school buildings, Knawa and the health staff focused on masking and social distancing. Now that masks are starting to come off, she said her focus remains on preventing COVID-19 infections. Her "wheels are constantly turning" about every school gathering.

"The dance at the end of the year, graduation, sporting events, music concerts. Where's everyone sitting? Are they contact tracing? Does anyone have symptoms? We think about all of that now," Knawa said.