

Viewpoint: Virginia Hospital Center staff mans the front lines — and front door

By Anthony T. Burchard – Virginia Hospital Center Foundation

A man enters the lobby of Virginia Hospital Center and slowly, deliberately approaches the check-in point, a pair of sad eyes visible above his mask. Quietly, he explains he is here to collect the belongings of his recently deceased wife. He patiently waits in the lobby as a security officer collects the items. As he prepares to leave, he turns back to say, “I’ve avoided coming back up here since she passed. Thank you. I’m glad that I came back to collect her things. It helps.”

This is just one out of the thousands of interactions that take place in the entrance of your community hospital each day. As we continue to grapple with Covid-19, VHC has suspended our use of volunteers to limit community exposure. To fill this vital role, our own employees are volunteering to honor our mission of serving the health care needs of our community.

During my volunteer shift, I served as a greeter in the main lobby, the first point of contact for people as they enter. I was initially overwhelmed by how busy we were — there was no time to sit during my eight-hour shift, and at peak times, I averaged one encounter per minute.

Hospitals never close, so entry monitors are needed around the clock. Enforcing our infection control protocols is a critical component in the hospital’s effort to battle Covid-19. Monitors welcome each visitor through the hospital’s doors and ask them to stand in front of one of six heat-sensing kiosks. In just a few seconds, the kiosk scans and determines their body temperature and all individuals with a temperature below 99.9 degrees Fahrenheit are cleared with a “thank you” and handed the surgical-style mask VHC requires all individuals entering the hospital to wear.

Visitors are then asked questions about their symptoms and any possible exposure to Covid-19. Those who are cleared receive a color-coded bracelet and are welcomed into the hospital. This entire process only takes about one minute and happens thousands of times every day across our campus. Not a single person including our doctors, nurses or hospital CEO is permitted beyond a checkpoint without completing the body temperature scan process.



Anthony T. Burchard is President of the Virginia Hospital Center Foundation.

We frequently hear how health care workers are on the “front lines” of the Covid-19 pandemic, but what I’ve realized through my time volunteering in the hospital’s lobby is that there are many different ways to serve on the front line. The individuals at the front door of a community hospital are filling a role that protects the people inside, but also provides much-needed comfort and reassurance. They share in the joy of someone who is arriving for their final well-check before giving birth and they grieve with those mourning a loss.

In the five days I worked at the front desk, not one person declined or questioned having their temperature monitored, nor did they refuse to wear a mask or a visitor’s bracelet. Patients and visitors seemed to intuitively understand the importance of these safety measures and, in return, were appreciative to have access to their doctors, nurses and therapists.

My experience at the front door of VHC has reminded me what it really means when we refer to ourselves as a community hospital. We serve our patient community by using the best available technology for testing to proactively manage everyone’s safety as patients return for nonemergent medical care, and we wholeheartedly appreciate our VHC employees. Though some departments at the hospital were shut down for weeks at the height of the pandemic, VHC elected not to furlough or reduce pay, putting patient and employee needs ahead of short-term cost savings.

The community hospital is a bedrock of the community where illness is healed, pain is relieved and emotional support is offered to those who come to us in need.