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UIC on the Frontlines of the COVID-19 Pandemic



As UIC's academic health enterprise, UI Health has been at the forefront of the COVID-19 response and relief efforts through its establishment of community testing sites, launching clinical trials, modification of clinical programming, and providing expert guidance to policy and advocacy experts for the state. Similar to the experience of others across the Chicagoland area, the work done by our own care teams and staff at UI Health has been driven by our sound practice of public health preparedness and prevention efforts while building toward something very anti-climactic – avoiding a dramatic crisis that our regional health care network didn't have the capacity to handle.

Earlier this year, physicians and health care leaders increased intensive care units and ventilator capacity to withstand a surge in COVID-19 cases while also adjusting clinical operations and anticipating shifts in our response efforts based upon developing knowledge of the virus. As a health enterprise with a robust inte-

grated research and training portfolio, UI Health acted quickly to build upon our collective knowledge of effective treatments through clinical trials led by some of our outstanding physician scientists. In fact, our Chief Quality Officer, Susan Bleasdale, MD, provided expert guidance to the University of Illinois System and state policy makers throughout the response to the pandemic.

We currently have **multiple active clinical trials** that explore the efficacy of medications (and combinations of them) in the treatment of COVID-19. Chief of Infectious Disease, Richard Novak, MD, leads two of these studies – one that is investigating the use of Remdesivir and another that is examining the combination of Remdesivir and Baricitnib in treating patients with COVID-19. Dr. Novak also launched the **first Chicago location of a national clinical trial for a COVID-19 vaccine**. Additionally, Associate Vice Chancellor for Population Health Sciences and Professor of Medicine,

Jerry Krishnan, MD, PhD, continues to conduct a clinical trial on the drug Sarilumab testing how it treats the disease. Dr. Krishnan is also leading a collaborative team across three health sciences colleges at UIC – named **Predictors of Severe COVID-19 Outcomes (PRESCO)**. This project, in partnership with Verily Life Sciences, aims to understand the biologic basis of disease progression in people with COVID-19 and to identify immune-targeted therapies that could prevent the development of respiratory failure and other health outcomes in COVID-19 patients. UIC also is the only institution in Chicago that served on the Protocol Development Committees for three national clinical trials that will study blood clot prevention in patients with COVID-19 and will be the first Chicago site to launch these clinical trials. The trials are part of the antithrombotics arm of the NIH's **Accelerating COVID-19 Therapeutic Interventions and Vaccines, or ACTIV, initiative**.

UI Health also continues to solidify our reputation as a leader in community-based care through the work of the UI Health Mile Square Health Center – a network of Federally Qualified Health Centers in Chicago. Members across our university family, including faculty, staff, students and neighbors, activated quickly to mobilize critical efforts to keep our patients and families healthy during such trying circumstances. We are assessing how the COVID-19 pandemic continues to amplify the health disparities present among our communities – especially among neighborhoods and commu-

nities on Chicago's South and West Sides. UI Health is addressing these issues with expertise from across seven health sciences colleges and our hallmark strategic commitment to serving under-represented communities in the pursuit of health equity.

As the pandemic rapidly evolved it became clear to us organizationally that we needed to listen and respond to the needs of our communities. UI Health started **COVID-19 Community Think Tanks**, which engaged over 600 community stakeholders in local communities to come together to inform impactful strategies and community needs to address localized disparities – especially among the Austin, Auburn-Gresham, South Shore and Cicero communities. We have conducted Think Tank events among the black and Latinx communities while engaging state legislators in these conversations to respond to immediate needs of our patients.

From the insight gained among the COVID-19 Community Think Tanks, Mile Square Health Center mobilized efforts around food pantry and community kit delivery programs. While these efforts fall outside of the traditional scope of a health care delivery model, we found these investments to be critically important to support and nurture the





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well-being and overall health of our patients and neighbors. The **Mile Square Food Pantry** is a collective effort among UIC's Colleges of Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy and the School of Public Health – alongside community partners of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois, Jewel-Osco and Mariano's to package 50 boxes per day to COVID-19 positive Medicaid patients and their families. The program distributed 1,300 boxes in the first three weeks and continues to implement these efforts. Additionally, Mile Square Health Center has initiated **community kit deliveries** in collaboration with the University of Illinois Cancer Center and the Residential Association of Greater Englewood to distribute 7,500 kits that include masks, hand sanitizer and educational materials to support wellness among our neighborhoods.

Partnership for impact has been a significant theme in our response

and community outreach. The UIC Center for Excellence in Maternal and Child Health connected with **Black Girls Breaking Bread** and other community organizations to provide expectant mothers with masks in preparation for their trip to a hospital for delivery or other appointments. This initiative has now started collecting donations of other childcare supplies for infants and babies. Our School of Public Health's Community Outreach Intervention Projects (COIP) was recently also funded through a partnership with **AbbVie** to hire staff to promote awareness and educate high-risk neighborhoods in Chicago about prevention and risk mitigation strategies to address COVID-19 in Austin, Uptown and West Englewood. Family Medicine physician, Evelyn Figueroa, MD, developed a response team for the **Pacific Garden Mission** – Chicago's largest homeless shelter – to provide infirmary-level care to over 200 individuals experiencing homelessness. Additionally, infectious disease physicians Stockton Mayer, MD and Richard Novak, MD joined **The Unsheltered Chicago Coalition** – a collaboration among some of the city's health providers – including Rush University Medical Center, Cook County Health, Lawndale Christian Health Center, the Salvation Army and Heartland Alliance - to test for and mitigate COVID-19 outbreaks among Chicago's vulnerable homeless population through guiding the development of testing in Westside crisis shelters.

Under the outstanding leadership of Dean Wayne Giles, MD, the UIC School of Public Health has

actively engaged and informed best practices of public and private sector organizations, including participating on Mayor Lightfoot's Racial Equity and Rapid Response Team.

The School of Public Health also has been selected to co-lead a \$56 million, City of Chicago-funded **contact tracing program** in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The program, which is spearheaded by the Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership, will fund the creation of the COVID Contact Tracing Corps and the COVID Resource Coordination Hub, which together will hire 600 people to provide contact tracing services to all of Chicago to help stem the spread of the virus.

Additionally, faculty of the Occupational Health Service Institute, under the direction of Peter Orris, MD, MPH and Susan Buchanan, MD, MPH, are providing consultation and educational outreach to a number of companies, unions, and institutes to answer employee- and workspace-related questions during the pandemic. This institute is working with wide-ranging groups including **Abbot Laboratories, Baxter, Cook County Health, Cook County Jail and the Cook County Sheriff's Department** and others, to keep essential workers protected as the state and agencies continue phased re-opening.

The continued evolution of our activities most certainly reflect many of our lessons learned along the pandemic's runway. We all often heard the phrase "building the plane as we fly it," and that most certainly rings true for our reality throughout this crisis. There has been little time

to pause for many of our dedicated health care workers and staff during the past several months. Even as we committed our time and energy to the service of our patients and communities, we also focused attention and resources to the mental and emotional needs of our essential workers who have shouldered the burden of the stress and emotional toll of working among such trying circumstances. In fact, leadership from our department of psychiatry established the **COVID Emotional Support Line** for health providers to support workers through counseling and psychological "first aid." Callers have included residents, nurses and other front line clinicians and the feedback received thus far has been very positive – callers report that they feel better at the end of the call and they frequently add that the most difficult part was picking up the phone.

These are certainly not the only lessons we have learned throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, these are certainly some of the most influential and innovative ideas that have guided us on our journey this year. As the state's public academic health enterprise, UI Health remains committed to educating the health care leaders of the future while pursuing health equity for our neighbors and communities across Chicago and beyond. This mission is even more important than ever as we continue to step into a world of COVID-19 recovery – and of course, we must keep listening and learning to move forward together.

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