

2020.04.01

Dear members of the Austen Riggs Center community,

As promised in earlier communications, I am taking this opportunity to provide you with an update on the COVID-19 situation at the Center.

First, I am pleased to report that we continue to have no confirmed or suspected cases of COVID-19 among the patients. One patient who was tested had a negative result. Among staff, we had one confirmed case of COVID-19. This staff member was isolated early on, has fully recovered, and is medically cleared to return to Riggs. She will continue to work remotely, as remote work fits her role. Additional staff members who were tested received negative results and have been medically approved to return to Riggs. In line with our protocols, a small number of staff self-quarantined for 14-day periods due to possible exposure to others who might have had the virus, but most of them, too, are now cleared to return to work. Although the risk remains that we will have patients or staff who become infected with the virus, we have plans in place for managing this. Meanwhile, we continue to implement serious preventive measures including social distancing, frequent use of disinfectants on surfaces, handwashing, and restricted travel and visitation.

As you know, relationships and a sense of community are the heart of the work we do at Riggs. We have all been working at ways to remain true to that foundational element while also prioritizing the social distancing measures and group size limits that are needed to mitigate spread of the virus. Over the last couple of weeks we have been holding community and other meetings with many members attending via videoconferencing (Zoom). This week we successfully held what I consider a landmark event at Riggs: The first All Center Meeting done with the majority of the 100 participants attending remotely via Zoom.

The gathering, which we hold monthly to bring patients and staff together, featured almost 80 people using our secure Zoom video service, plus a couple dozen other people in appropriately distanced seating arrangements in the Community Center Living Room. Of the many All Center Meetings I've attended, this one had notably high attendance.

As is typical, before the meeting I met with a representative of the patient group and the non-clinical operations staff to set an agenda. The three of us went into the meeting wondering if we could successfully create a sense of community via Zoom. In the meeting, several patients and staff commented on how good it was to see so many faces on the screen, hear their participating voices without the need for cumbersome hand raising, and how this helped recreate the sense of connection we were familiar with before the COVID-19 crisis began. To be sure, these positive observations were balanced by a few other voices reflecting concern, uncertainty, and anxiety – itself a familiar and healthy sign of a community working. Overall, the feedback suggests this effort to assemble the entire Riggs community for a connected discussion was experienced as a resounding success.

Among the issues that emerged in the discussion, a major one was communication. Now that we have largely re-designed the clinical operation into our first pass at creating a COVID-19 appropriate structure, getting the word out to people about these changes and other issues is a

top priority. With that in mind, this week we expect to launch our new “Patient Portal” to share communications patients in a HIPAA compliant, secure way. Implementation of the Patient Portal had been planned as a later stage in the development of our new Electronic Health Record, but current circumstances led us to prioritize the launch now, while adding more functionality over time.

In addition to the staff COVID-19 Committee that meets regularly to plan our responses to the crisis, patients have elected their own COVID Committee, which has already had its first meeting with members of the staff committee. I’ve asked this group of patients to speak up and offer their ideas and experiences, including telling us what we have not gotten right in decisions we made to adapt Riggs to the current situation.

In response to both staff and patient requests for more information and education on the COVID-19 pandemic, I’ve arranged for Nils Daulaire, MD, MPH, a public health physician who served in the Department of Health and Human Services in the Obama administration as the US Representative on the Executive Board of the World Health Organization, to provide a “Pandemics 101” webinar to staff and patients in the next week or two.

Another topic that came up during the All Center Meeting was finances. I shared with staff and patients that, to date, Riggs has been able to retain all staff at full pay. This not only helps our staff with their economic needs, but will also help us be ready to return to full operation quickly when this crisis passes. Many of our staff have been able to transition to working remotely, and we have relaxed our sick leave policies to offer staff more flexibility when they need time off for themselves or to care for loved ones. Over the last twenty years, Riggs has been able to put aside resources for “a rainy day.” Senior Leadership and the Riggs Board of Trustees recognize that this is a rainy day. We are also considering modifying the fee structure to respond to some reduction in services that have been inevitable as we adapt to COVID-19 requirements for social distancing.

We have accomplished a good deal in a short time, but there is much more ahead in a changing landscape as the pandemic and its impact unfold. This has been and will continue to be a challenging experience for all of us. I am firmly committed to the view that we, clinical staff, non-clinical operations staff, and patients, will get through this together, as individuals and as a community.

With that thought, I wish you all well and look forward to working with you all.

Sincerely,

Eric M. Plakun, MD
Medical Director/CEO