

Communication from the Medical Director/CEO  
**Updated 04/17/20**

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.

We are entering the second month of responding to the pandemic. The challenges we face as individuals and as a community are on a scale that few of us have experienced before. It has not been an easy month for any of us. We have each faced fear, anxiety, doubt, uncertainty and our own mortality. At the same time, we have experienced hope and inspiration from countless examples of bravery, compassion, and dedication that so many people here at Riggs – by both patients and staff – and others beyond Riggs – have demonstrated.

In that spirit, I'd like to share the following information with you.

**COVID-19 Status:**

As was the case in my last message, I am happy to report that we have no confirmed or suspected cases of COVID-19 among the patients. We did have one presumed case, to which we immediately applied our isolation and quarantine protocols. Happily, her COVID testing returned as negative and her symptoms resolved, making it clear that she did not have COVID-19.

Six other patients were in quarantine for relevant exposure to that person despite our ongoing efforts to encourage social distancing. All six are now released from quarantine. We are hopeful this will serve as a teachable moment that will reinforce among patients the importance of social distancing and other measures.

Our nursing staff, guided by Chief Nursing Officer Cheryl Puntill, has developed the procedures we need to care for COVID-19 positive patients with mild to moderate illness if we should have any in the future. Additionally, given demands on nursing resources and the complexity of the assessments we need to make, I have appointed one of our staff psychiatrists, Heather Forouhar, MD, to serve as the Infection Control Physician. She is working with nursing, Human Resources, and the medical office to oversee decisions made about quarantine, isolation and return to work.

Since the crisis began, a total of two Riggs staff have tested positive for COVID-19. These illnesses were not associated with additional exposure of anyone at Riggs. One staff member has fully recovered and returned to work. The other is on paid leave while she recovers.

**Finances:**

I'm pleased to share with you news that our application for a low-interest government loan has been approved and the money has been received. This assistance, which will support our payroll for two and a half months, is part of the "Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act" (CARES Act) that Congress approved last month to help the country through this crisis. This loan has the potential to become a grant over time if we comply with its requirement that we use it to keep our staff on payroll. Such a grant, in conjunction with emergency funding from "rainy day" reserves that the Board has authorized, represents a significant economic buffer for the Center.

On the other side of the equation, though, we are facing a decline in census. This decline reflects the discharge of patients who have successfully completed their treatment, as well as some who elected discharge or were otherwise not able to continue due to program changes we've instituted for the safety of the community – our move to many remote Zoom individual and group sessions, restriction of movement in and out of the Inn, and development of a remote access Aftercare Plus Program.

The census decrease is also driven by our temporary suspension of admissions, yet another step we took to protect patients and staff while we rapidly developed and implemented new ways of working.

**Resuming Admissions:**

It is still premature to resume admissions. However, as noted above, it is becoming increasingly clear to me that this crisis may well persist in some form for multiple months or even a year or more. We will need to find ways to admit new patients if we are going to carry out the core mission that led to our inclusion by the Governor as an essential healthcare facility. We are exploring ways to resume admission involving a 14-day period of quarantine, COVID testing and remote video treatment. As you can imagine, the clinical, technical, and logistical challenges of pulling this together are complex. I've asked our Director of Admissions Samar Habi, MD, to take the lead in thinking through a safe way to resume admissions to Riggs in the near term.

**Masks:**

Masks have become a topic of much discussion. There is conflicting science on the value of cloth masks, which, unlike N95 and surgical masks, are becoming less scarce. In making decisions for Riggs as a whole, including the need to balance safety with provision of optimal clinical care, it is our goal to rely on what is scientifically established and/or required by relevant agencies. This is a challenging goal, as guidance sometimes varies and changes over time. We are following the guidance of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

On April 5, DPH recommended that all clinical and non-clinical staff wear masks in "clinical care areas," which we think of as primarily the Inn, other patient residences, and other places at Riggs that patients receive treatment where social distancing is a challenge. Staff have been wearing masks at the Inn, and, now that more masks have arrived, we expect patients will

follow suit. Of course, there is a need for education on proper use and storage of masks, lest improper use and storage undermine any benefit they provide. One place where the CDC, DPH and the World Health Organization (WHO) all agree is that use of masks is just one part of a complex system that relies most heavily on social distancing, proper handwashing, and sanitizing of surfaces. Education about COVID-19 and pandemics plays a central role in all of this. We were quite fortunate that internationally recognized public health physician Nils Daulaire, MD, MPH, presented an excellent “Pandemics 101” webinar to our patients and staff. We have posted it [HERE](#), if you’d like to see it.

We are, most certainly, living through difficult times. The need to enforce new restrictions, like quarantine and other measures, means that there have been ongoing pressures to close down the open setting in response to the crisis, but the open setting is part of our soul. During this crisis, I have asked all to join the spirit of keeping every aspect of Riggs as open as possible, but as restrictive as necessary. I have no doubt that if we can join together in doing this, we will get through this crisis as individuals and as a community.

Stay well,

Eric M. Plakun, MD  
Medical Director/CEO