

Updated 12/08/20

Dear Members of the Austen Riggs Center Community:

As we exit one year marked by the rise of COVID-19 and prepare for another that we all hope will see the pandemic decline, I want to share some important information about how the Center is working to protect the safety of our patients and staff.

Testing/Contact Tracing:

As has been the case with previous updates, I am pleased to report that no patient at Riggs has tested positive for COVID-19 since the start of the outbreak. We have been able to maintain this status through the hard work of everyone on campus and by constantly adapting to an ever-changing environment.

One of our most important recent steps was to institute a regular COVID-19 PCR testing program in November for all patients and staff through the Broad Institute and Cambridge Innovation Center. This is the same group that conducts testing for dozens of schools, universities, and other organizations throughout the Northeast. Test results generally return within 24 hours, are shared with the individual, our staff monitoring team, and on our COVID dashboard on this page each week.

In accordance with CDC guidance, anyone with a positive test enters isolation. Staff members who develop COVID-19 will remain off campus until medically cleared. We are prepared to provide supportive treatment in isolation to any of our patients who develop COVID-19 or to transfer them to the Berkshire Medical Center or elsewhere if they develop medical problems beyond our capacity to manage in a residential psychiatric facility. We are also prepared to work with local authorities to do contact tracing to identify others who may require quarantine because of potential exposure.

Visits:

In recent weeks, Berkshire County has seen a dramatic uptick in COVID-19 cases. In response, we have asked patients and staff to limit their risk of exposure to the fullest extent possible. Through this effort, we hope to avoid the “Shelter In Place” restrictions put in place last spring.

The parameters we have created seek to lower risk in two ways: first, by minimizing exposure to people outside the community (travel, visiting, indoor activities in public places), and second, by reducing the possibility of transmission within the Riggs community (with masks, social distancing, ventilation, frequent handwashing, and routine testing).

We have provided guidance to patients about visits with others within the Riggs community and from outside Riggs. We are asking any patient who wishes to have ongoing indoor contact with a family member or other close person to review the situation with their program manager or the charge nurse in advance to establish that person as a safe contact. Social workers are also available to work with family members to clarify levels of risk and to explain our efforts to keep patients and others in the community as safe as possible. We ask that everyone in our community (staff as well as patients) limit their outside contacts to people who are also limiting their risk of exposure to the

fullest extent possible. Anyone who works in a high-risk setting or is engaged in practices that present a high risk of exposure to COVID-19, is asked to postpone visiting indoors until the pandemic risks have subsided. This includes riding together in a car, eating in restaurants, or staying together in hotels. We realize that it can be difficult to be separated from loved ones, especially during the holidays, and we are grateful for your help with this.

Outdoor visits, in which people socially distance and wear masks, remain fine. Any on-campus guest will be screened by nursing staff, who must be notified in advance of the visit. However, given the current elevated risks, visitors from outside the local area are discouraged at this time. Of course, anyone who is experiencing any symptoms of COVID-19, or who has a known exposure to someone with the illness, should not visit with a member of the Riggs community.

Vaccines:

Health officials have notified us that Riggs could be eligible for the early rounds of a COVID-19 vaccine, once it has been approved for use in the United States. We are monitoring these developments and paying close attention to the safety and efficacy of any vaccine that is made available to us.

Related to this, I asked that all staff and patients on campus receive a flu vaccination by December 1, unless they provide documentation of a medical exemption. I am pleased to let you know that we have achieved full participation in that effort.

Looking Ahead:

Even in the best of times, the holiday season can be stressful. In thinking about these past nine months and those immediately ahead, that stress seems all the more intense. That said, there are things for which I am both grateful and optimistic. I thank the patients, family members, and staff for their dedication and discipline needed to get through this crisis. I remain optimistic that a thoroughly tested and safe vaccine, in conjunction with a new emphasis across the nation on adhering to mask and social distance advisories, will finally break the grip this pandemic has on us.

It won't be easy, and it won't be quick. But if we work together and hold in mind Riggs' longstanding emphasis on the importance of relationships, I am hopeful that 2021 will be a much happier new year.

Stay vigilant, stay safe,

Eric M. Plakun, MD
Medical Director/CEO