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Wawa Foundation – Hero Award

In the midst of this COVID-19 world, health care professionals are the first people that come to mind when we think of heroes. Doctors and nurses and home health aides and therapists donning gloves and face masks – personal protective equipment – that will provide safety from the exceedingly contagious coronavirus. People who have vowed to put the well-being of strangers before themselves.

Through both the Spanish Flu of 1918 and the COVID-19 crisis today, VNA Philadelphia (Visiting Nurse Association) has been at the forefront of community health. The characteristics of heroes are apparent in each and every VNA staff member that has continued to work during this crisis. We have seen our medical staff heroes rise to meet “the immense challenges of the community” by distributing medicine - and food - to the low-income, medically frail people with whom we work. Our physicians, nurses, social workers, chaplains, therapists, hospice aides, bereavement counselors, volunteers and talented support staff work together to provide quality, personalized care that addresses the unique and challenging physical, spiritual and emotional needs of our patients and families. The care that our clinicians provide is aimed at keeping patients safe and comfortable at home while avoiding re-hospitalization and increasing the burden on our Hospital ER systems.

As the oldest health care agency in the region, our mission “through [our] dedicated staff, is to provide comprehensive home health, palliative and end of life care of the highest quality to all people, regardless of their ability to pay.” The largest “hospital without walls,” VNA Philadelphia serves the Philadelphia area including Bucks, Montgomery, Chester and Delaware counties. VNA Philadelphia provides care to approximately 1,200 patients per day through our home health, hospice and palliative care programs combined. Of this, close to 30% of our patients have a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19. Additionally, 10% of our clinicians have contracted the virus, most likely through their contact with our patients.

Close to 300 staff members and 67 volunteers – including college students, former hospice workers and members of a choir – work out of VNA Philadelphia’s East Falls Headquarters. VNA Philadelphia operates a 15-bed Inpatient Hospice Unit; an innovative Home Health program which includes Home Health Aides, LPNs, RNs, BSNs, Nurse Practitioners, Therapists and MSWs; a Palliative Care program which helps chronically ill patients and their families improve quality of life and a Population Health program with MSWs and Clergy. Specialty programs include diabetes education, telehealth, mental health, wound care and alternative therapies such as virtual reality, and pet and music therapy. Our food pantry provides frozen meals and fresh produce to our patients which our staff hand deliver to patient homes’; extra food from our food pantry is distributed to Community Partners to help those most impacted by food insecurity related to COVID-19.

Over 16,000 people in Philadelphia alone have a diagnosis of COVID-19 with over 1,200 deaths to date. VNA Philadelphia serves Bucks, Montgomery, Delaware and Chester counties as well; these counties account for 20,461 additional cases. In this time of crisis, health care workers – one of our most valuable commodities – are on the front lines. The work that they do, day in and day out, is inspiring and so often improves the quality of life.

Defined as person who is “admired or idealized for courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities,” there is a sign that resides outside of VNA Philadelphia’s

headquarters which speaks volumes: *Heroes Work Here*. The outpouring of support that our medical staff has received in this time of crisis is humbling: donations of N95 masks, homemade masks and gowns. For our staff to also receive the Wawa Foundation's "Hero Award" would be so meaningful to us and the hundreds of people in the community whom we serve.

Below are a few examples from past patients of the Clinical and Psychosocial heroic aspect of our staff's care. It is important to note that not one of these stories would be possible without our nursing staff or the community's generosity and compassion:

- We recently had a patient who was granted compassionate release from prison to our hospice inpatient unit to receive Comfort Care at the end of life, during the Covid-19 pandemic. The social worker worked hard to reconnect this patient to her family members who live out of state. These family members have not had physical contact with this patient in over 10 years. The social worker held several video conference calls to help with this reunification. The family eventually made it to the Philadelphia-area where the social worker arranged for a family reunion meeting where the family and patient could have their first meal together in well over a decade. Had this patient been released to a hospital, instead of our IPU, it is probable a visit would not have been possible due to Covid-19 visitor restrictions in place in facilities.

The social worker continues to work with the patient and family to help relocate the patient to receive hospice care in the family's home state so the patient and family can have continued uninterrupted time in her last moments of life. This heroic act of caring and compassion showcases the #vnaphiladelphiadifference that is so important.

- One of the "last wishes" of a young woman in our care for Hospice was to go out for a steak dinner with her daughters and friends after visiting a spa. A day-long stay at a spa was arranged, where the woman was pampered from head to toe with a massage, hair and nail treatments! (This was not an easy task, as all of the care needed to be varied due to previous treatments the woman had undergone, the approval needed by the woman's nurse and then coordinated by our chaplain!) Several ambulance trips were also required for transport. After her spa trip – and before dinner – the woman remarked, "I can die now; I'm pretty."

After a long day's work, the woman's nurse, her hero, chose to go to dinner with this patient rather than go home to her family. The patient smiled ear-to-ear upon seeing her, and loved being surrounded by her friends and family. The following day, the patient was non-responsive. The day after that she passed away – "pretty."

- Common ground is so important and once our chaplain discovered that one of the patients' she visited on a weekly basis liked the Phillies, she started bringing him the Sports section of the newspaper. Thanks to her tireless work and the care of a nurse, they were able to get this gentleman to his first Phillies game since Shay stadium! Our nurse arranged for a catheter for this patient so that he was able to enjoy watching the game from the seats with his son and grandson. In fact, during the 7th inning stretch and "God Bless America," this patient cried tears of joy!
- Rebecca had always dreamed of attending her little sister's wedding. Not only would the wedding in Fairmount Park be that once-in-a-lifetime occasion, Rebecca would get to celebrate with family members that she hadn't seen recently. VNA's Hospice team made this possible, as VNA's nursing manager accompanied Rebecca, administering her medicine when it was needed and even recruiting a team to drive to a nearby hospital to pick up a more comfortable medical chair for her use. This nurse's act of compassion was another heroic act.

Most recently, Philadelphia has been besieged with protests that have resulted in looting and vandalism. Our clinicians' biggest worry is not for their own safety, but rather for trying to figure out how to navigate through road closures and unsafe areas to get to their patients. VNA Philadelphia is proud to employ a team of selfless, dedicated, and brave women and men who truly are heroes.