

Morton Hospital in Taunton Converting to COVID-19 Center

By Michael P. Norton

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The Massachusetts health care landscape is shifting again in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Steward Health Care on Saturday began transforming Morton Hospital in Taunton into a dedicated care center for patients who test positive for the virus. The company on March 17 made a similar move at its Carney Hospital in Dorchester.

Steward, a for-profit health care company unlike the many non-profit hospitals in the state, also suspended inpatient intensive care admissions at Nashoba Valley Medical Center in Ayer, saying the change will increase its overall ICU availability by redeploying staff and equipment to communities with increasing needs.

Another significant change: Steward is consolidating inpatient intensive care admissions at Holy Family Hospital by drawing resources from its Haverhill campus to the Methuen campus ICU unit over the next few days.

Steward says the size of the Holy Campus campus makes it possible to create an isolated unit in Methuen to care for COVID-19 patients.

Gov. Charlie Baker declared a coronavirus state of emergency on March 10, when the state had 92 confirmed cases. On Saturday, state public health officials reported 11,736 cases of COVID-19 in Massachusetts, 216 deaths attributed to the virus, positive cases at 96 long-term care facilities, and hospitalizations of 1,068 COVID-19 patients. The state is operating under a stay-at-home advisory ahead of a surge in

cases that's expected to arrive as soon as Friday.

Dr. Joseph Weinstein, chief medical officer for Steward Health Care, said traditional models of care are ineffective at addressing the surge in virus cases, citing "lessons from Italy and China."

"Significantly lower infection and mortality rates were achieved in places like Germany and South Korea, where hospitals clustered COVID-19 patients in isolated locations, thus lessening the chance of infection for other patients and staff," he said.

The changes associated with the "proven isolation strategy," according to Steward, include better care and recovery chances for COVID-19 patients, reduced mortality rates, and better capacity for other Steward hospitals to care for patients undergoing treatments for health conditions unrelated to the virus.

Steward Health Care operates 35 hospitals in nine states and serves more than six million patients annually.

Nurses from Steward hospitals in Arizona and Utah began arriving in Massachusetts this week to assist with care, and more than 100 nurses from other Steward hospitals in Massachusetts have volunteered to be temporarily reassigned to hospitals with greater needs.

Steward also reported Sunday that it launched a program "months ago" to acquire and stockpile specialty ventilators and personal protective equipment to treat COVID-19 patients as part of preparations for the arrival of the virus. Once the coming surge declines, the company plans to move unused equipment to its other hospitals as those facilities deal with an influx of patients.

The claims about preparedness conflict with assertions from the Massachusetts Nurses Association, which represents more

than 2,750 nurses and health care workers in eight Steward-owned hospitals in Massachusetts. On Friday, the nurses union alleged that Steward is inconsistently providing protective equipment like N95 masks and gowns and that nurses “are forced to reuse soiled masks for days.”

“If the stockpile exists, there is a disconnect because the supplies are not generally accessible to staff when needed,” the union said.

In a statement released by the nurses association on Friday, Carney Hospital nurse Peg Conlon said, “Yesterday there were not enough N95 masks available in the ICU, in the special COVID-19 units or anywhere in the hospital. What we do see is a dangerous rationing of PPE at Carney, which is a guarantee for more spread, and of a loss of staff as more of us become sick.”

Inadequate access to personal protective equipment has been a worldwide problem, putting health care workers at risk and aiding in the spread of the virus.

Baker on Sunday plans to visit a drive-through COVID-19 testing site in Foxborough at 12:30 p.m. Boston Mayor Martin Walsh plans a 3 p.m. virus update. At 4 p.m., U.S. Sen. Edward Markey holds a livestream discussion with Sara Nelson, international president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO.