

New Bedford announces establishment of two regional care centers for COVID-19

New Bedford, Massachusetts— Mayor Jon Mitchell, Southcoast Health President and CEO Keith Hovan, and representatives of Essex Group Management Corporation today announced two Southeastern Massachusetts Regional Care Centers in New Bedford for those recovering from COVID-19.

This week, the City entered into leases with the owner of two former nursing home facilities at 1123 Rockdale Avenue and 4586 Acushnet Avenue, which will be operated by Essex Group's nonprofit Buttonwood Healthcare division, while Southcoast Health will serve as the medical and clinical lead.

The Southeastern Massachusetts Regional Care Centers will serve as post-hospital recovery centers for patients recovering from COVID-19. Patients admitted to the hospital with COVID-19 may need extended recovery time from the illness and/or may need additional time to be released from quarantine, utilizing one of these care centers. The care centers may also accommodate patients who have been tested and require quarantine, in a separate unit with private rooms at the facilities, until test results are complete.

In these cases, the patient may be transferred to one of these care centers, until they can be safely discharged to their home or transferred to another healthcare setting. The Rockdale Avenue site has 107 beds and the Acushnet Avenue site has 123 beds. Both will be staffed by physicians and advanced practice nurses who are committed to seeing that patients are cared for and treated.

More than three weeks ago, recognizing the need to increase

capacity of the region's health care system to manage a surge of COVID-19 patients, the City began to explore potential sites to serve as recovery centers for patients whose condition requires medical care, but are not serious enough to remain in the hospital. Having identified the Rockdale Avenue and Acushnet Avenue as the most suitable sites for this purpose, the City deployed its Department of Facilities and Fleet Management to bring, with the owner's permission, the facilities back to life. Since then, DFFM exhaustively has cleaned the facilities, completed repairs to the plumbing, heating and electrical systems, re-certified the elevators, removed and replaced furniture and equipment, upgraded kitchens reestablished the security systems, and landscaped their exteriors.

With the work underway, the City began discussions with Southcoast Health, the region's leading healthcare provider, to serve as the medical lead for the facilities. With the assistance of the Massachusetts Senior Care Association, Southcoast Health in turn reached out to Essex Group, which operates two nursing homes in Greater New Bedford, to serve as the facility operator. The Massachusetts Department of Health and Human Services agreed to a service funding arrangement similar to those in place at state run COVID-19 facilities in other parts of the state. The City itself has agreed to be the lessor of the properties.

The facilities are slated to be ready to open the week of April 13, pending the state's authorization to exempt this type of facility and those who work in it from civil liability for COVID-19-related care. Yesterday, Governor Baker filed legislation toward this end. The facility will serve Southcoast Health's coverage area throughout Southeastern Massachusetts.

"As the saying goes, the big players step up in the big games. In the midst of the most threatening health crisis of our lifetimes, our city employees, Southcoast Health and Essex

embraced the challenge before them and have worked together to set up facilities that will help save lives. I am grateful to Southcoast Health and Essex Group for their steady and invaluable partnership on this effort, and to the city team's initiative and tireless effort," said Mayor Jon Mitchell.

Southcoast physicians and medical professionals are committed to providing the care necessary for patients with COVID-19 who will be discharged to one of these post-acute care centers in New Bedford. Each facility will be staffed with Southcoast physicians, nurse practitioners, registered nurses, advanced practice providers, and certified nursing assistants.

Southcoast's Dr. Himesh Sheth will serve as medical director for the Rockdale Avenue center, officials said, and the not-for-profit community health system's Infection Prevention team will be available for consultative support and guidance. A Southcoast physician will also serve as medical director at the Acushnet Avenue care center.

"With many of our models indicating a 'when, not if' scenario for a surge in patient volume due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been working closely with Mayors Mitchell and Coogan, the town of Wareham and other municipalities, Essex Group, area businesses, our local legislative delegation, Governor Baker's administration, and the Department of Public Health to establish more capacity in Southeastern Massachusetts," Southcoast President and CEO Keith Hovan said. "Our pledge to the communities we serve is that Southcoast will do everything in our power, including through partnerships like this one, to protect our patients and frontline staff as we combat this public health crisis."

Essex Group, through its nonprofit Buttonwood Healthcare division, is the management company that will operate the two care centers, and ensure compliance with federal and state regulations and adherence to Center for Disease Control and

Medicare guidelines for COVID-19 recovery treatment. An operator of elder services facilities, Essex Group is the owner and operator of Brandon Woods of New Bedford and Brandon Woods of Dartmouth. Both centers will operate as the Southeastern Massachusetts Recovery Centers, Buttonwood Healthcare Facilities.

“To paraphrase Steve Jobs, ‘Great things in a crisis are never done by one person, they are done by a team of people,’” Essex Group Management Corporation CEO Frank Romano said.

The care centers are a collaborative effort among healthcare systems in Southeastern Massachusetts. Hawthorn Medical Associates, an affiliate of the Steward Health Care Network, as well as the Greater New Bedford Community Health Center, are among the local healthcare systems supporting the establishment of the centers and have committed to collaborating to support the centers.

Mayor Mitchell declared a state of emergency in New Bedford on March 13 due to the COVID-19 outbreak and has acted to enforce social distancing measures, including the closure of personal care businesses and playgrounds, to protect public health during the state of emergency.

On April 1, Mayor Mitchell and the Board of Health acted to protect residents including seniors in New Bedford by announcing strict measures on wellness checks, quarantining, and isolation requirements for senior living facilities, nursing homes, and group residences. These facilities are subject to regular inspection and are required to implement mandatory, stringent health-based measures for all staff members and residents, and failure to comply can result in a fine of up to \$500 per day.