

PA House Majority Policy Committee Hearing
January 19, 2022

Good morning, Chairman Causer, Representative Rapp, members of the House Majority Policy Committee, and staff. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this hearing addressing health care issues in rural Pennsylvania.

My name is Janie Hilfiger, I am the President of two rural hospitals in North Central Pennsylvania – UPMC Cole (2019) and UPMC Wellsboro (2012). I have been in health care for more than 40 years beginning my career as a Registered Nurse and then learning, growing, and leading in various roles within the hospital setting. I have the privilege of working with great people who are doing great things by providing great care to our patients. I am passionate about rural health care and ensuring that services are available to the residents of our rural communities.

The pandemic has forced us to staff differently forcing us to look at how we can deliver the same level of care with less. I am not talking less supplies, because we have not experienced a supply shortage. I am talking about a staffing shortage, a shortage that has been created by the pandemic and by travel companies offering huge amounts of money to join their team. I have taken the time to meet with staff members leaving for traveling assignments in the hopes I would hear something I could fix, something that would prevent them from leaving. The answer is always the same, it is for the money, money they cannot pass up and money we cannot compete with.

Our Medical Surgical (Med Surg) Units have been experiencing patient numbers since late summer that nearly double the number of beds we are licensed for. Patients that became accustomed to a private room, a TV, and a bathroom of their own are now sharing.

Keeping the disease confined and providing care for other community members that have illness that are still common on Med Surg has been the job of an amazing team of caregivers. Every day is challenging. Registered Nurses (RNs), Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) and Personal Care Technicians (PCTS), that take immense pride in the personalized care that they provide have been asked to stretch above and beyond, to do much more in the same amount of time. While the Med Surg staff is the backbone of care, as the pandemic stretches on staff from the Operating Room and Cardio/Pulmonary Rehab are becoming regulars on this nursing unit. Learning is ongoing and to say that flexibility is required is a gross understatement. The committed professionals that I work with share ideas for assignments and suggest partnerships to complete care, while keeping a watchful eye on each other. The job is extraordinarily difficult. Long hours and extra shifts can be compensated in dollars but not in the time that has been sacrificed.

Other departments share staff as “helping hands”. The staff of our provider offices are frequently on the floor, bells need answered, baths need given, and patients still need their walk in the hall. Central Sterile, Lab, Pharmacy, and the Environmental Services work force come early and stay late putting the needs of UPMC Wellsboro and Cole’s patients first. We could not do it without them; it is no small feat to ask as they share their hearts and their time when they could go home.

We have some new nurses joining our teams and I have immense respect for those that choose to jump in now. Discussions about patient/nurse ratios are coached with “this is what it looks like today”. We have learned that each day is different, and attitude can make or break a team. Nurses are retiring and leaving for other nursing jobs. Vacancies are a loss in manpower and experience that could take years to fill.

Within the last year, the Emergency Department has faced many challenges that we have not experienced in the past, nor could we have predicted them. Some of these challenges include: the continued pandemic, care of OB patients transferred to the Emergency Department for a short time, boarding patients, increased wait times, and high RN vacancy rates. With the presentation of each of these challenges came increased stress for both the staff and patients. Of course, there are longer wait times – no one wants care to be delayed, and we work every day to monitor, act differently, and prioritize. We do all we can to make sure those who have to wait can wait safely. The Emergency Department teams continue to diligently face the challenges and have consistently remained flexible to help meet the needs of the department, their fellow co-workers, and the patients they so tirelessly provide care day in and day out. It is because of these teams and their improvement ideas that we have been able to enhance processes so we could continue to provide effective care to our patients and community.

In a small hospital all departments come together to provide support to one another as we face unprecedented challenges.

UPMC hospitals, like all others in the region and the Commonwealth, have a need for health care workers caused by many factors – some reexamining their careers, leaving the workforce entirely, or leaving for new employers, and others made different choices for less time at the bedside or additional flexibility. Starting months ago, UPMC expanded its recruitment and retention offerings to employees and perspective employees to address the needs of many types of workers, nurses, and others. Numerous job fairs have been held over the last few months to recruit fellow community members to join our team. Recruiting for Family Practice and Specialty physicians has always been particularly challenging for rural areas.

Rural hospitals providing obstetrical services are also very fragile; with the fear that, if these services were no longer available in the rural hospital setting, patients would have to travel long distances during unpredictable weather to deliver their child.

We urge anyone who is eligible for COVID-19 and flu vaccines to get them, mask and use appropriate social distancing practices. We'll continue to do all of the activities we are doing today to make sure we have room capacity and that capacity to meet needs for all seeking care. We are looking at how we do everything. We have developed more advanced ways to provide care for people outside of the hospital setting. We know that people want to recover at home, and they often recover better there or another setting outside of a hospital. We are focused on being as efficient and effective as possible. We work closely to best coordinate care on an individual basis with post-acute care providers, including long term care residences. Long term care settings have similar capacity challenges, which cause further delays in long-term care admissions producing outflow issues from the inpatient setting.

Our elected officials play a powerful role in educating and encouraging vaccination. You can positively advocate for the safety, efficacy, and necessity of COVID-19 vaccination. Our plea is for everyone eligible for COVID-19 and flu vaccines to make the choice to get them. That plus masking indoors or in crowds with those not in your immediate family, are the best protection from COVID-19 and flu. If you get sick, stay at home, and get tested – that will allow us to better help you.

Please know that our healthcare workers are working hard to provide the care that people need. They are true heroes and deserve understanding and patience.

Thank you again for allowing us to share our thoughts and perspectives today. I would be happy to address any questions you may have.