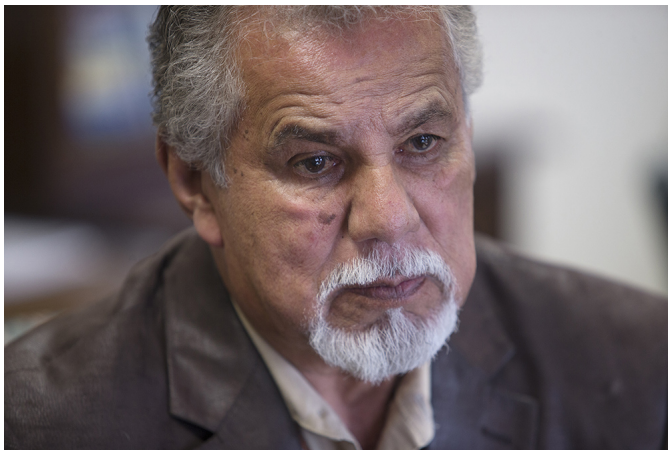


The Devil's Dilemma

Written by By Beth Blakeman Associate Editor
Friday, 17 April 2020 05:14



Changes at RMCHCS

Elective surgeries and most non-urgent health services will be put off due to Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham's executive order March 25. Lujan Grisham says the decision is to protect the state's supply of equipment that workers need in order to stay safe from COVID-19.

That order caused some re-evaluation at Rehoboth McKinley Christian Health Care Services. RMCHCS will decide on procedures on a case by case basis.

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“With this new rule in effect, it affects our finances. As we approach the difficult financial challenges COVID-19 imposes on us, like many other businesses across the globe, we are taking prudent financial steps which make sense,” RMCHCS CEO David Conejo said

One of those steps meant ending contracts with 15 traveling nurses, whose 13-week agreements can be renewed or canceled with a two-week notice, as long as the hospital pays the nurses for those two weeks.

Conejo said those nurses will receive that pay. But they will not be paid through the end of the contracts, if the dates go beyond the two weeks' notice.

In hearing the story of Tom Kenyon, one of the nurses in the ER who spoke to the *Gallup Sun* about not being renewed, Conejo expressed regret.

“It's the collective effect of everything that's stopping hospitals. The problem is so massive that we can't make it right for everyone.”

Kenyon, 55, from Detroit City said he worked for almost a year at RMCHCS. He said April 3 was his last day, but he was expecting it to be April 25.

Kenyon said that cutting ER nurses like himself and mid-level physicians assistants and nurse practitioners would mean long wait times and impacts on procedures that were not elective.

He was also concerned about two traveling nurses who he believed had their contracts renewed because they were married to people working in the hospital, one as a radiologist and one who worked in labor and delivery.

Conejo said that if it was necessary to reduce total staff in the ER and someone's spouse

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performed a specific procedure the hospital needed, it was prudent to keep that nurse and move them to an area where more nurses are required.

“They are putting the public in harm’s way. That’s how I see it,” Kenyon said.

Conejo said the hospital is COVID-19 ready, but he views the situation as what he refers to as “the devil’s dilemma.”

“If we lay people off and we get a surge of patients, suddenly we don’t have enough people. If we don’t get enough people, expenses will eat you up.”

RMCHCS has made application for financial aid through the state and FEMA.

Conejo points out that if the hospital gets a substantial check that may provide enough for its needs. But it all depends on how long COVID-19 lasts.

“If COVID runs through November, a lot of money will go up in smoke,” he said.

In terms of the financial situation, “We’re trying to keep panic from spreading,” Conejo said.

Once the elective procedures stop, so does virtually everything else, so not as many people come in for the ER or lab work. They’re afraid of going to the hospital because the COVID might be there.

In other words, the income goes down, but expenses stay up.

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"We have sufficient supplies for our normal number of patients. If we get transfers, or a surge, from Crownpoint or Fort Defiance, or an increase in our patients," Conejo said that's when PPEs can dwindle.

"We're reaching out to everyone we can. There are a number of companies contacting us, reaching out to us, too. We had masks that a month ago cost \$0.43. Today they cost \$10. How many \$10 masks can you afford?"

Then Conejo talked about ventilators.

"We're low right now, but we're adequate. But we're trying to find more." He didn't care to venture a guess as to what ventilators might cost.

By Beth Blakeman
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