

Making a difference in local lives

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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Gallup nurse chronicles treating COVID patients

During the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, hospitals across the world were overrun with patients needing treatment. Most of them may have recovered, but not without suffering potentially lasting health issues. Headlines flew each day about the number of new cases and the people who had succumbed to the disease. The number of total deaths across the world passed one million just before Sept. 30.

Being a first responder in a hospital during unprecedented times could be expected to take a severe toll on anyone, as well as those near and dear to them. Anna Rogers is one of those people.

Rogers started working at Gallup Indian Medical Center last October because she wanted to care for the underserved, according to a release by United World College-USA. Six months after starting, she found herself treating COVID-19 patients in the hardest hit area per capita for the pandemic in the United States, the Navajo Nation.

“It’s been challenging, emotionally and physically,” Rogers said in the release. “It has been isolating personally and professionally, and it’s been hard to watch the devastation in the community. There’s not a family that hasn’t lost a loved one on the Navajo Nation.”

As of Sept. 29, 10,333 positive cases were confirmed on the Navajo Nation. This number

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includes 7,255 recoveries and 555 deaths.

Rogers was born in Gallup and moved to California when she was five, but then returned to New Mexico to attend United World College-USA near Las Vegas, N.M.

She is a 2012 graduate of the University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine and completed her residency in family medicine at Ventura County Medical Center, where she remained with the hospital for two additional years before moving to Gallup.

She currently works for the U.S. Indian Health Service, a government agency that provides care for 567 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and their descendants, or about 2.2 million people.

Health experts said the coronavirus has been devastating because of a lack of infrastructure on the reservation. An estimated 30 percent of reservation homes lack running water, and over half of Navajo communities do not have broadband access.

A shortage of healthy food options, overcrowded housing and high rates of heart disease, diabetes and obesity compound the problem.

“The [Navajo people] have such strong family networks and live in multigenerational homes so it’s difficult to isolate,” Rogers said. “Those communities that have been systematically marginalized are a setup for a respiratory virus to be particularly bad because of difficulty isolating and keeping their community protected.”

These family networks were why the Navajo Nation was hit with a disproportionately high number of cases compared with the rest of the country, Rogers continued.

“We very quickly had a significant number of cases in the emergency room and admitted to the hospital,” she said. “The sickest were often flown to Albuquerque. Ultimately, the state set up a

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hub, where patients were sent all over the state – Santa Fe, Farmington and Las Cruces.”

Gallup’s 99-bed hospital had up to 45 COVID patients admitted to the inpatient wards, forcing Rogers to work 10-to-12-hour days. She also had to protect herself and her staff. Rogers has tested negative for COVID six times to-date.

Another challenge was Covid-19 rules and regulations. The hospital didn’t allow in-person visitation, but provided video visits for patients and their families.

Rogers said the hardest part about caring for COVID patients was when they were alone and scared, and their family wasn’t able to visit them. This proved especially difficult on Mother’s Day.

“To have a family on a Zoom meeting, having to say goodbye to their grandmother on Mother’s Day [was painful],” Rogers said. “[The family] knowing Mother’s Day would be difficult forever, knowing their grandmother had to die alone without family in the hospital, in a culture where when a loved one dies, there are often 10 to 20 family members in their room with them.”

Rogers said her time at United World College-USA led to her decision to go into medicine, a career where she could make a difference in local lives.

“I’m interested in global health, and at some point will work abroad and this opportunity allowed me to serve a very underserved population,” she said. “I think it’s important to provide access to excellent health care to those who need it most.”

The United World College-USA is one of 18, two-year international high schools on five continents for 16-to 19-year-olds. UWC-USA offers the International Baccalaureate Diploma and has an average enrollment of 230 students from more than 90 countries; 85 percent of its students attend on scholarships. To learn more visit www.uwc-usa.org.

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