

UW Health: How hospitals adjust to respond to the pandemic

Posted on Tuesday, Aug 24, 2021

>> **WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

MADISON, Wis. – Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare workers have been nimble in meeting the ever-changing challenges. Many of these changes are highly visible. Patients are screened at the hospital and clinics entrances. Personal protective equipment is required for more patient interactions than ever before. Patients are tested for COVID-19 before procedures.

One thing many people may not think about is how the physical space must change to protect everyone inside the healthcare system from the virus. UW Health facilities maintenance and design leaders explain how hospitals react quickly to rising cases and alter the healthcare space, setting the stage for patient-centered care and to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

“We think of ourselves as the stagehands of the play here at the hospital,” said Michael McKay, director, Planning Design and Construction, UW Health. “You’re not supposed to see us, but the show can’t go on without us.”

The COVID-19 pandemic response required the expertise of more than a hundred facilities professionals, according to James Harrod, director of maintenance and engineering services at UW Health. Engineers, architects, craftworkers (carpenters, electricians, heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) specialists), safety, transportation, quality and compliance experts, and more, contributed daily to the innovative facilities solutions that support safe patient care.

One of the most important things facilities specialists focus on during the pandemic has been the creation of special rooms to reduce airborne viral infection. These rooms are designed with negative air pressure specifically to handle patients with airborne infectious disease. Negative pressure rooms draw air from the hallway and

expel air through a filtered air duct to the exterior of the building. Negative pressure rooms are “sealed” to prevent COVID-19 infected air from leaving a patient’s room into hallways populated with staff or, in some cases, other patients or visitors according to McKay. The air pressure in these rooms is measured daily to ensure they continue to hold the negative pressure.

Facilities staff also enable frontline workers on COVID-19 units to reduce the number of times they need to enter a patient’s room, saving personal protective equipment (PPE) and reducing the time healthcare providers are exposed to COVID-19. Facilities specialists altered and rewired rooms so that patient vital signs could be monitored from outside of the room. This allows care providers, including nurses, respiratory therapists, physicians and others, to perform routine wellness checks without donning the full PPE required to enter a COVID-19 patient’s room, according to McKay.

The facilities team was also charged with creating spaces that encouraged physical distancing. This includes indicating six-foot distance using circles pasted to floors where lines form, placing barriers or plexiglass where the six-foot distance is difficult to achieve, applying signs noting the number of people that could safely occupy elevators and other enclosed spaces, and in many cases removing furniture from patient waiting areas, cafeterias and break rooms to ensure people could not gather too closely to one another. UW Health facilities staff were also instrumental in creating new spaces required for treatment and testing of COVID-19 patients. At the beginning of the pandemic, they helped build a COVID-19 testing site to serve UW Health patients and employees. They expedited an intensive care unit remodel to be used for COVID-19 patients. They turned UW Health’s John Wall Drive location into a drive-thru testing and vaccination site to meet the community demand for COVID-19 testing over the winter of 2020-21.

“UW Health has been working for years to create the safest, cleanest environment using creative solutions within our space,” said Harrod. “We will have to continue to be nimble to support the great work our nurses and doctors have been doing in the face of the unknowns associated with COVID-19.”