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Students, faculty volunteer at drive-thru vaccine site

In Clifton, Berkeley College students and faculty are serving as frontline volunteers, administering COVID-19 vaccines to thousands of area residents.

On Wednesdays, teams of students in the Berkeley college Licensed Practical Nurse to Bachelor of Science in Nursing program administer vaccinations under the supervision of nursing faculty from the School of Health Studies at a drive-thru site at Clifton High School.

Students from other programs such as Medical Assisting, Practical Nurse, and Medical Billing and Coding are assisting in other roles, and all are excited to be part of these efforts and feel connected with the healthcare community.

“Given the many challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, a show of solidarity exhibited through volunteering by students enrolled in different School of Health programs as well as faculty is heartening”, said Dr. Eva Skuka, dean, Berkeley College School of Health Studies. “The collaboration with the City of Clifton’s Health Department helps Berkeley College’s nursing and allied health professions students develop as compassionate, well-rounded healthcare professionals.”

According to Suzanne Mullings, PhD, RN, Interim Chair, Nursing programs, Berkeley College School of Health Studies, who has been instrumental as a volunteer and engaging the students’ participation, “COVID vaccination sites offer a unique learning opportunity in a community setting for students studying nursing, public health or other fields in healthcare.”

“It’s been a great working relationship,” said John Biegel, Health Officer and Director of Human Services, City of Clifton, the department manages the site. “This is the third week that (Berkeley College) students are here and they’re doing an outstanding job.”

“Service learning is essential in healthcare. Having students apply the skills they learn in the lab is an indis-

pensable component to making them successful,” added Joseph Charleman, DBA, Chair, Surgical Technology and Surgical Processing programs, who serves as Berkeley College faculty supervisor at the Clifton vaccination site.

Margaret Morales, Nursing, Berkeley College School of Health Studies, another faculty vaccination site supervisor, said, “Students are learning skills such as disaster preparedness, team work, compassion and how to allay patients’ fears. Nursing doesn’t only occur in hospitals,” said Morales. “Nursing is a part of the public health spectrum in our communities.”

Berkeley College students began volunteering on Feb. 24 about a month after the site first opened. On March 10 five Berkeley College nursing student-volunteers administered second doses of the vaccine to eligible residents under the supervision of three faculty members.

The students, currently Licensed Practical Nurses, will graduate with their B.S.N. degrees in August of 2021. They worked alongside more senior nurses who administered first doses. In total, the Clifton site served about 5,000 local and state residents that day.

“It’s been a great experience. I am able to give out COVID vaccines for the first time,” said LPN to B.S.N. student-volunteer Ashley Foster of Hackensack.

Although Foster has worked in healthcare for 8 years, first as a certified nursing assistant (CNA) before becoming an LPN, her previous experiences have all been in traditional hospital settings. Volunteering at the drive-thru vaccination site is Foster’s first public health experience and first time administering vaccines.

“This is my first experience, volunteering in a situation like this. It’s a good feeling to give some type of normalcy back to the community,” said Foster.

YEAR LIKE NO OTHER

The optimism and excitement of volunteering students and faculty is palpable. Like everyone, students and faculty have contended with many challenges over the last year.

In reflecting on her experience during the pandemic, LPN to B.S.N. program student-volunteer Massy Reyes of Prospect Park, who is also a mom of three and works per diem as an LPN at Preakness Health Care Center in Wayne, said, “It was very hectic. I had to question my ability to do this, as a mom, a teacher, a wife, a student, all of that.” Reyes’ children, ages three, six and nine, have mostly done virtual learning from home, requiring Reyes and her husband to modify their work schedules to accommodate their children.

Elenita Talavera, Clinical Instructor, Nursing, Berkeley College School of Health Studies, who serves as a faculty supervisor at the Clifton site, also works part-time as a Registered Nurse at Hackensack University Medical Center in Hackensack.

She recalls feeling helpless at the start of the pandemic. “You go to work and see people struggling to live, gasping for air, and you can’t do anything. At that time, we were still trying to figure out the right treatment.”

The pandemic has also been a challenge for academic continuity and on site instruction in higher education. Berkeley College quickly pivoted to remote instruction by relying on its technology infrastructure and long-standing excellence and experience in distance learning modalities.

In June 2020, the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education in New Jersey granted Berkeley College a waiver to conduct required laboratory sessions for winter and spring semester students in the School of Health Studies at the Woodland park campus. These onsite sessions began on June 29, 2020.

Volunteer

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The main focus, and an essential goal, of the Berkeley College School of Health Studies programs is to develop knowledgeable and competent healthcare professionals capable of providing skilled and safe patient care.

“As future healthcare professionals, graduates of our programs will be required to make important clinical decisions, to interact with clients and families in a caring and empathetic manner, and to implement complex manual and technological skills,” said Skuka. “Therefore, returning to campus instruction was critical, because it allowed us to effectively teach the laboratory and clinical components of our programs so that students could learn and master the ability to transition the didactic knowledge to lab and clinical skills, which in turn they can transition to practical applications in the healthcare setting when they become independent healthcare professionals.”

The approval of the waiver allowed the college to assist 187 Berkeley College School of Health Studies students scheduled to graduate in April and August (winter and spring semesters) of 2020 complete all requirements for graduation in early August.

Graduating those students offered the opportunity for them to pursue careers in healthcare and to alleviate some of the frontline workforce shortage that healthcare was experiencing at the peak of the COVID-19 crisis.

Talavera remembers helping students adapt to online and hybrid approaches to learning, and helping them through any challenges. “This was new for me as

well, since all my life clinical has been at a hospital,” she said.

Expanded telehealth options, new safety protocols and improvements to contact tracing, in addition to changes in teaching and learning, are just a few of the advancements made in the field as a result of the pandemic, which posed gaps in healthcare policies and procedures, and a dramatic shortage of nurses and public health workers.

Research published in the American Journal of Medical Quality in 2018 estimated, a nationwide shortage of 510,394 registered nurses by 2030, a deficit that has likely worsened post-pandemic. Catalyzed by an unprecedented health crisis, the field of healthcare looks a lot different than it did a year ago.

“The pandemic is definitely—hopefully—a once in a lifetime event,” said Charleman, who has more than 30 years of experience in healthcare. “This is all a learning experience for us. That’s one of the things you have to prepare for. To be able to navigate through it and come out successfully is the key... and to learn.”

POSITIVE LESSONS

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly devastated communities in serious and lasting ways, and recovery is just at the beginning stages. Vaccination is an important first step to returning to normalcy.

At the Clifton drive-thru vaccination site, there is almost unexpected pervading joy and hopefulness in everyone from volunteers, health department staff and even residents receiving vaccinations.

The community response to the Clifton site has been positive, indicating how much residents cherish the oppor-

tunity to return to some of the conventional ways of life.

“The community members are very appreciative if they get an appointment,” said Loyal Helwani, Health Educator, City of Clifton Health Department. “Once they get to the site, we’ve gotten great feedback about how smooth and accessible it’s been.”

Morales notes that residents often express their gratitude to student volunteers. “They really make the nursing student feel like the hero that they are,” she said.

After a year of balancing life as a full-time student, full-time LPN at Palisades Medical Center in North Bergen, and a mother of two, Foster said, “I learned a lot about patients and understanding... You just have to be there for one another.”

Reyes spent most of the last year prioritizing her family, her mental and physical health, and deepening her spirituality. Her perspective now differs so much from that of a year ago.

Reyes said, “I appreciate so many things that I never thought about on a day-to-day basis... Now I wake up every morning thanking God for everything.”

As communities move toward recovery, the “new normal” will include lessons learned in a time of crisis. New perspectives on health, happiness, family and career are some of the key takeaways of the last year for Berkeley College student-volunteers and faculty.

Berkeley College celebrates its 90th anniversary in 2021.

The theme commemorating this milestone is “Empowering Live for 90 Years!” Visit the 90th Anniversary webpage for more information.

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