

The Difference TTUHSC Makes in Your Community

Academic health institutions, including Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (TTUHSC), have a similar mission. Our focus is to educate future health care professionals and deliver research-based clinical health care. That said, we also believe in expanding care beyond the clinic by engaging in community outreach services — often in very innovative ways.

When I became TTUHSC's ninth president last June, we were four months into an unprecedented global pandemic. Many of us had already experienced a disruption to our professional and personal lives unlike we had ever experienced. In the months before June 2020, and since then, we have all faced insurmountable challenges, sacrifices and significant loss.

During some very uncertain days, TTUHSC was there. Time and again, we initiated efforts to address specific health care needs in this region — and impacted care statewide.

Personal protective equipment (PPE) shortages was one of the early critical issues. In March 2020, the World Health Organization estimated that the industry would need to increase manufacturing by 40% to meet rising global demand.

With efforts focused on high population areas, getting these critical supplies to rural regions like ours was an unsurmountable challenge. TTUHSC stepped up with solutions, including:

- **West Texas 3D COVID-19 Relief Consortium:** A collaboration between TTUHSC faculty, staff and students, Texas Tech University (TTU), and local and regional business partners. Over 16 months, this team produced and distributed more than 10,000 face shields and other PPE.
- **Team Decon:** A joint effort between TTUHSC and TTU's Institute of Environmental and Human Health (TIEHH) Bioterrorism Response Laboratory. The team utilized a research-based decontamination method of N95 masks so they could be reused. Over 12 months, the team decontaminated more than 12,000 masks for 56 health care organizations and clinics statewide.
- **TIEHH Bioterrorism Response Laboratory:** More than 50 student volunteers from TTU and TTUHSC joined the laboratory staff to expand capacity and be the first laboratory in Texas to test for the coronavirus. The laboratory is part of the Centers for Disease Control Laboratory Response Network, serving 67 counties. Their efforts guarantee a 24-hour turnaround on up to 700 samples tested daily.
- **Viral Transport Medium (VTM):** An interdisciplinary team of approximately 30 faculty, staff and student volunteers from our schools of Pharmacy and Medicine in Amarillo utilizing existing facilities and knowledge to preserve coronavirus samples for transport to testing sites. They produced and distributed more than 465,000 vials. Early in the pandemic, they produced 3.6% of the state's total VTM supply. Gov. Greg Abbott tabbed VTM as a statewide solution to the critical fight against COVID-19.

These are just a few examples representative of the TTUHSC's innovation and collaboration, reflective of this region's DNA. We do not wait for others to solve health care challenges but instead identify options and work together for solutions, having done so for more than 50 years.

Karen Fisher, JD, chief public policy officer for the Association of American Medical Colleges, writes, "When the worst happens, medical schools and teaching hospitals are at their best. ... These institutions are ready to address every emergency, whether a terrorist incident, an infectious disease outbreak like Ebola, or a natural disaster."

Never a truer statement — although the work goes beyond physicians and teaching hospitals. Health care requires an interdisciplinary team of professionals working collaboratively across the community and support from community partners and donors. It really does take a village, and COVID-19 revealed opportunities that we envision leading to enhanced delivery of care, stronger collaborations and research innovations.

Nationwide, academic health institutions and teaching hospitals are the solutions that will sustain our communities. We address solutions to workforce shortages and medical services, creating healthier, stronger and more competitive communities, preparing, as Fisher states, "for whatever challenges lie ahead."

To lead my alma mater through what may be the most challenging time any of us will ever experience has been an honor. We have shown what we can do working together within our TTUHSC family, the TTU System and with community partners and generous donors. More importantly, I believe that on the other side of this pandemic is an opportunity for TTUHSC to use lessons learned to transform health care across our communities, great state and beyond.

Lori Rice-Spearman, Ph.D., was named the ninth president of Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center on June 5, 2020.