

PRINT-OSF launches new hotline following closure of neighboring hospital in Galesburg

OSF HealthCare is not only dealing with a COVID-19 surge that is nearing, or surpassing, all previous surges of hospitalization, but in the western Illinois community of Galesburg, there's a perfect storm of sorts.

A neighboring hospital of OSF HealthCare St. Mary Medical Center's recently and abruptly closed after facing numerous challenges, including de-certification by the U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) due to safety concerns. OSF St. Mary President Lisa DeKezel says a hotline will help patients of Cottage Hospital transfer their care.

"We are getting a lot of inquiries from former Cottage Hospital patients, asking 'How do I transfer my care? How do I transfer my records?' Please know that we are here to serve you."

The hotline will be staffed from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, Outside of those hours, callers can leave a message to receive a call back. **The hotline number is 309-344-9438.**

DeKezel says her team began preparing to be the community's sole provider more than two years ago, when it was becoming clear Cottage hospital was facing challenges, and Cottage began cutting key services and providers.

For the past six to eight months, and in large part due to the pandemic, OSF St. Mary and OSF Holy Family Medical Center in nearby Monmouth had already been accepting Cottage patients at an accelerated pace – for emergency care, surgeries and procedures, even for complex care requiring time in an intensive care unit. DeKezel stresses, it hasn't been an overnight influx and OSF HealthCare leaders have been preparing by recruiting new providers, including specialists, and expanding and improving facilities.

"We've recently renovated our entire, second floor surgery department. We're adding additional ICU beds here at St. Mary Medical Center in Galesburg. We also expanded our obstetrics unit a few years ago as we prepared to be the sole obstetrics provider in the region. And we're doing a 10,000-sq-ft ED (emergency department) renovation at Holy Family Medical Center in Monmouth to expand those capabilities as well."

Dr. Brandon Briggs, the emergency department director at both OSF facilities, says even though OSF is prepared to handle a growing number of patients due to the challenges at Cottage Hospital and Clinic, the latest COVID-19 surge has created a perfect storm.

Dr. Briggs stresses that now more than ever, especially because of the ultra-contagious omicron variant, people need to take every measure available to protect themselves and the most vulnerable in their community. Because of preparation, OSF is able to manage the patients coming to us for care currently. However, Dr. Briggs if rapid community spread continues, there won't be a hospital bed for patients who need a higher-level of care than what can be provided at St. Mary's, which is considered the regional hub for more acute patients.

"It's making it more difficult to get patients where they need to be because of the pandemic, and the bed crisis and the lack of availability. So, that leads into the precautions about COVID taking it more seriously so that we do have those beds for patients that truly need them."

In addition to wearing a well-fitted mask in public, washing hands, and using good judgement when deciding to attend larger gatherings, Dr. Briggs urges people to carefully consider whether they need to be seen in an emergency department.

"We don't want to deter any patients from coming to the ER if they feel like they're having a true medical emergency. We do ask that they have patience if they do come to the emergency room. If they do think their condition could be treated in an outpatient facility (primary-specialty care offices or walk-in clinic), we do ask that you try to do that."

Most importantly, OSF Saint Mary's and OSF Holy Family are equipped and ready to serve, and continue to serve, the community. Leaders are continuing to assess community needs and believe the culture and Mission at OSF HealthCare is an attractive option for providers who are committed to their patients and want to continue serving the local region. However, DeKezel said that for various reasons, not every former Cottage provider will be hired. Those decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis and will depend also on whether some of those former employees are interested in joining a new health care system.