

Cleaning Rooms and Touching Lives

The Amazing Impact of Environmental Services

Not all superheroes wear capes. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, that phrase has been heavily used as a way to honor front line health care workers: doctors, nurses, and other hospital staff. One role that is often overlooked, but is a first line of defense when it comes to infection control, is that of an environmental services (EVS) technician.

Sanitization and cleanliness is always top of mind in hospitals, and now it's more important than ever. EVS technicians play an important role in health care. It is their responsibility to keep patients and hospital staff healthy with the proper medical cleaning and disinfecting.

Jeanice Harris is one of the EVS superheroes at OSF HealthCare St. Joseph Medical Center in Bloomington. When the pandemic first hit, she was there – cleaning the COVID-19 unit. Harris says the early days were hard, but she felt a deep responsibility to the patients she served.

“When it first started I was upstairs in the COVID unit. It was rough. It was. Every day I wanted to quit, but they needed me just like I needed them,” Harris reflected.

As the pandemic raged on, hospitals across the country, including OSF St. Joseph, enacted new visitor policies, strictly limiting or temporarily prohibiting visitors to keep patients, their families and hospital staff safe during COVID surges. Sometimes Harris and her EVS colleagues were the only non-clinical faces these patients saw. She says she took that responsibility to heart, and looks back at that time with raw emotions.

“They said I saved them. A lot of patients say that I saved them because I would tell them about my COVID story. And I'm like, you know you wouldn't be up here if you weren't in a bad condition. And they just said I gave them so much hope, like I was the light at the end of their tunnel,” Harris said, while wiping away tears. “And it meant a lot to me because all I was doing was cleaning their room and being supportive. Letting them know that everything is going to be okay. Just pray everything is going to be okay.”

In her three and a half years as an OSF HealthCare Mission Partner (employee), Harris has made a lasting impact on her coworkers and patients alike. One of these patients nominated Harris for the Cintas C.A.P.E. Award, which stand for Cleaning to Advance the Patient Experience. The award is designed to recognize the ongoing dedication and efforts of EVS staff.

Harris was one out of ten EVS workers across the country to receive the award out of nearly 1,000 nominations. The recognition came with a ceremony in Bloomington, recognition on the NASDAQ Tower in Times Square in New York City, and a check for \$2,500. Harris said when she learned about the award she cried grateful tears.

“I cried,” she said. “I cried like a baby. I was like, who? Who did this? Who nominated me? Like of course I couldn't nominate myself so, I don't know. I'm thankful for whoever did do it.”

Now, as Harris continues her service, creating safe environments and sharing smiles with patients, she says the COVID-19 pandemic has given her a new outlook on the impact she and her EVS team members have on those around them. When you ask her how she feels about her job, quite simply, it's super.

“Like I'm wearing a cape right now,” Harris laughed.