

## **PRINT SCRIPT-'We have seen so much need': OSF Pandemic Health Navigators support those with COVID-19**

Food, housing and income insecurity remain concerns for millions of Americans, especially those who have been infected with COVID-19.

The ongoing concerns prompted Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker to extend a Pandemic Health Navigator (PHN) program through June of next year. The program, which launched in April, was to expire at the end of 2021. The governor noted, however, that the pandemic continues, and with new variants, there's a need to make sure those with COVID-19 are isolated at home to prevent community spread.

Kara Roat, manager of the OSF OnCall digital health care worker program, said the effort uses community health workers to connect individuals who have COVID-19 and their families to community resources such as food, income assistance and household items.

"A lot of times these individuals are not allowed to work during that [10-day, two-week period](#) (of isolation) which leaves them with financial instability. So, we align them with several community-based organizations that can help meet their needs during that gap time when they were unable to work."

The state-administered program is funded by the federal government's [American Rescue Act](#). OSF HealthCare serves as the regional coordinator for the northwestern region of the state, which covers nine counties and includes the cities of Rockford and DeKalb.

Roat says OSF has seen so much need since the start of the program.

"The process started pretty slowly. We would get just a handful of resources that needed to be met. Today, we're meeting probably upwards of 150 to 200 resource requests a day and have met nearly 7,000 in the past eight months."

Referrals to the program come from public health departments.

Food is among the top needs among those who respond to a survey, asking what kind of unmet needs they have in their household.

"There are so many requests for food. We probably deliver food to 10 people every day all across Region 1 which is nine counties. So when you think about our Tri-County area (around Peoria) but have to do nine counties, you're going pretty far to deliver food to somebody. The same with those COVID care kits. We deliver a ton of those each and every day but there's a lot of value in it."

To date, four PHNs working in the northern region of Illinois outside of Chicago have delivered nearly 3,000 COVID-19 care kits with essential household products.

"So they have things like hygiene supplies, different kinds of laundry soap, hand soap, hand sanitizer, anything that somebody may leave their home during that period, we try to provide them to prevent them from going anywhere."

Shania Brown is a PHN working in the region and is also working towards getting a bachelor's degree in social work. Brown says the opportunity was a perfect match for someone whose goal in life is to help others.

"I was really wanting to get some of that experience in social work – connecting with people on a more personal level and just being able to help them. I've found that it's beyond rewarding."

The biggest challenge for Brown was becoming familiar with the region and getting to know the various partners that make up the social service safety net. Now, with a great resource directory that continues to grow, Brown says she's gained more experience in making connections and rounding up what individuals and families need most.

Roat describes a recent phone call from a pregnant woman whose husband had lost his job. She connected the family to Catholic Charities and delivered food and diapers that should last for several weeks. It was heartwarming to hear her gratitude.

That happens regularly according to Brown. Recipients call to say 'thank you.'

"They have told us how big of a help providing those organizations to them was because they can reach out to those organizations long after their isolation period and they're able to get the help that they need."

Pandemic health navigators do provide those they help with a list of community resources for future use.

Outside of the northern region, OSF HealthCare is offering support to OSF patients who are 18 and older through at-home monitoring and just-in-time advice about care if an individual's COVID-19 symptoms worsen. A person can receive an initial screening for COVID-19 using [our digital assistant Clare](#), by a referral through our [OSF OnCall Urgent Care](#), or by a primary care provider.