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NEWS

COVID-19 putting a heavy burden on Iowa's air ambulance crews

George Shillcock Des Moines Register

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Air ambulances used by Iowa's three largest health systems are busier than ever because of COVID-19.

The number of flights per day for helicopter crews at MercyOne, UnityPoint Health and University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics, already up since the pandemic started in March, has spiked this month as cases have risen.

It took about seven months into the pandemic, on Oct. 12, for Iowa to report its 100,000th case of COVID-19. On Thursday, just five weeks later, that number doubled to more than 200,000. Another 3,401 new cases and 33 new deaths were reported Sunday morning.

Each day in November, Iowa set records for the number of people hospitalized for COVID-19 until peaking at 1,527 patients on Tuesday. During May's coronavirus peak, about 400 people were hospitalized.

Michael Zweigart, program manager for UnityPoint Health's LifeFlight service, said his organization has seen flights increase nearly 260% this month — about seven to 10 flights per day — compared to November 2019. About 70% of its current flights are COVID-related.

Many of those flights are transfers to Des Moines from smaller hospitals around the state that may not be staffed or equipped to handle every patient, Zweigart said. Other transfers are made between larger medical centers depending on the availability of beds.

Ty Hobbs, a flight paramedic with MercyOne Children's Hospital, said MercyOne Air Med flights are seeing a similar increase, although exact flight data was not made available to the Register.

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He's not as worried about the organization's ability to staff extra flights as about the physical and mental fatigue his coworkers face — a worry Zweigart shares.

"We're working in a confined environment with these COVID-positive patients, which gives more added stress of transmission from them," he said. "But we take all necessary precautions to try and prevent that."

Zweigart said just being in the helicopter can cause fatigue for the flight crews and medical team because of vibrations, sunlight and the physical activity of moving patients and caring for them in flight.

"We also have the effects of life outside work in addition to the increase in volume at work," he said.

Diane Lamb, program manager for the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics AirCare service, said the organization had a nearly 15% increase in flight volume since July. And crews have been even busier in the last few weeks.

Zweigart said a few air ambulance crew members have tested positive for COVID-19, but they believe they contracted the virus outside of work.

To combat potential transmission, the air ambulances have to go through an intense sanitization routine between each flight.

Hobbs said for MercyOne, every nook and cranny of its four helicopters is wiped down with an extra-strength solution, and the helicopter is aired out for 20 to 30 minutes. In addition, both pilots and the medical team on board wear extra PPE.

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"This is obviously an obstacle, but we're trying to overcome it and provide the care that these rural communities need," he said.

According to MercyOne, which has helicopters in Des Moines, Mason City and Sioux City, each has an average coverage range of about 150 miles. AirCare has three helicopters based in Iowa City, Waterloo and Dubuque. UnityPoint operates from three locations, with helicopters in Des Moines, Fort Dodge and Carroll.

As the recent wave of COVID-19 hospitalizations began to pick up, hospitals in eastern Iowa were inundated with cases. Air ambulances and hospitals across the state had to work

together and transfer patients to other hospitals.

Zweigart said that process is called "leveling," which makes sure beds are available for more severe COVID-19 cases and that any one hospital isn't overloaded with patients. It's taken vast coordination efforts between hospitals and their air ambulance services, he said.

"We're trying to work through this together and help each other out to get the state of Iowa covered," Hobbs said.

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