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Salute to Nurses: Being there for their patients at Seacoast Mental Health Center



While staff therapists and doctors are using telemedicine to work remotely, nurses Christopher Bashaw, Heidi Burbank and Jane Neville are manning the Seacoast Mental Health Center locations in Portsmouth and Exeter to administer medication and assess patients in person as well as making home visits.

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PORTSMOUTH – In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, nurses are on the front lines of caring for patients, and at Seacoast Mental Health Center, the mental health aspects of the virus are their concern as they try to deal with that fallout and still safely take care of their own patients.

Three nurses - Christopher Bashaw, Heidi Burbank and Jane Neville - talk about what it's like. Most of the SMHC staff therapists and doctors are working remotely, through telemedicine, but the nurses are still seeing their patients.

“Jane, Chris and I have yet to miss a day,” said Burbank. “We are seeing all of our patients. Since the providers are doing telehealth visits, we are following precautions here and doing what needs to be done in person.”

Neville said the nurses have to be face-to-face with patients because they are responsible for giving out daily medications and injections as well as doing patient assessments. They also do home visits.

People coming in are nervous about COVID-19, said Burbank.

“A lot of our patients are feeling more isolated, lonelier,” said Burbank. “We talk with them about how they are doing, how they are feeling. We ask if they have enough food. If they need help, we are hooking them up with the services in their community that can help them.”

Neville said she tells her patients to take this situation one day at a time.

“I tell them they can call me if they need me,” said Neville.

“We tell them if they can get through today, they can reach out to us again tomorrow,” said Burbank. “We assure them this is not going to last forever, and that we’ll get through it together.”

Both the SMHC buildings, in Portsmouth and in Exeter, are open for clients. Burbank said they are doing symptom screening for the patients and staff before anyone is allowed in the building.

“It’s odd to come into the building now,” said Burbank. “This place is usually bustling with essential personnel. Now it’s so quiet. We miss our social group of workers.”

In Exeter, Neville is often the only person in the office.

Bashaw said most of his clients are on the psychotic scale so may not completely understand what is happening with COVID-19.

“I am still doing a lot of hospital admissions,” said Bashaw. “We, all of us, gown up whenever we need to go into someone’s home. We use protective equipment here and for outside appointments. I try to impress the importance of social distancing to my clients. I make sure they are eating and that they have someone to cash their check.”

Neville said at both offices now there are stashes of items their clients might need.

“We keep things like water, ramen, granola and snacks,” said Neville. “We keep deodorant and tampons, whatever we can keep on hand.”

Neville credits SMHC’s Executive Director Jay Couture with making sure her nurses have the protective equipment they need to do their job safely.

“She is our PPE (personal protective equipment) Super Shopper,” said Neville. “When other places say they are out of what we need, she is finding a way to get it.”

Burbank said members of the community have been making masks for the staff. She said they are beautiful, and the nurses are grateful.

“Community support is really appreciated during this unusual time,” said Burbank.

The nurses are understandably worried about their exposure, particularly about bringing the coronavirus home to their own families.

“I spray my shoes down with alcohol,” said Neville. “My clothes go immediately into the washer and dryer and never into the house. I have not seen my mother-in-law since March. I miss family.”

Bashaw said he undresses in his kitchen, so his clothing never enters the rest of his home.

“My advice to everyone? Stay home and wear a mask when you need to leave the house,” said Bashaw.