

## **Hospitality houses adapt practices to accommodate loved ones of hospital patients during the pandemic**

An ordinary afternoon at the Ronald McDonald House in Iowa City, Iowa, used to involve families introducing themselves to one another in the hallways, or sitting down to a meal together and exchanging stories. If the weather was nice, parents could relax and watch while their kids enjoyed the playground outside.

That all changed, however, when the spread of COVID-19 temporarily shut the house down in March 2020. From there, staff had to work with local public health entities and the local hospital to devise a safe reopening plan, Development Director Heather Croskrey said.

“One of our biggest concerns as this started to approach was the fact that we were dealing with families — with critically ill children,” she said. “We had transplant kids that were staying at the house; we had parents with babies in the NICU. These are very vulnerable populations and the last thing we want is to not do everything in our power to protect them.”

Ronald McDonald House Charities is one of many organizations that has had to reevaluate how to provide housing and other services for the loved ones of hospital patients during the pandemic.

More than a year after it initially closed its doors, the Ronald McDonald House in Iowa City is finally resuming its normal rhythm, Croskrey said. Primary changes include mandatory COVID-19 screenings, a mask requirement, and vaccination among staff and volunteers.

The house's common areas remain shut down, she added, so families are still unable to socialize with one another.

“That component of support that's intangible, that was definitely lost for the most part, and there's not much we could do about that,” Croskrey said. “What we could focus on is providing the basic needs that we could ... just making sure that we got as many families as we could a place to stay [and] a hot meal.”

Toni Moore, president of the Hospitality House of Tulsa, Oklahoma, said her organization also had to reevaluate how to build relationships and cultivate a supportive community for guests.

“When COVID hit, all of a sudden, you can't be relational,” Moore said. “You have to figure out how to be relational from a distance, or behind a mask, or on a phone or through a text message.”

Despite the unknowns and the fear that came with COVID-19 at its outbreak, Moore said the Hospitality House of Tulsa did not close its doors completely in March 2020 because so many of the organization's guests had come from thousands of miles away to receive special treatment from local hospitals.

So, while her staff left to work from home, Moore and a single housekeeper moved into the house themselves to take care of anything that could not be done virtually for the next month. Together, they cleaned all the rooms, replenished the mask supply and did the guests' laundry.

“The business part of the nonprofit does not stop just because COVID was here, and the guest needs do not stop just because COVID was here,” Moore said.

The hospitality industry may be a small “piece of the puzzle,” in healthcare, Croskrey said, but it is vital. Staying close together, with a good night’s sleep and hot meals, is essential for the health and wellbeing of a family, she said.

“The first thing that parents do when their child is sick is cease to take care of themselves,” Croskrey said. “And we are here to help the parents take care of themselves so that they can take care of their children.”

Hospitality houses also provide a financial safety net for families in medical crises, Moore said, allowing them to save a significant amount of money that can then be applied to paying mortgages, rent, groceries or other expenses.

Because of hospital visitation changes amid COVID-19, loved ones of patients can no longer sleep in waiting rooms if they have no other options — meaning hospitality houses are more important than ever, Moore said.

“The hospital is focused on the best care for the patient,” Moore said. “The hospitality houses focus on the best care for the caregiver.”

Moore said her staff will continue to wear masks for the foreseeable future, whether because of COVID-19, flu season or even just a sinus infection, to make guests feel safe when social distancing is not an option.

Melissa Thompson, executive director of the Healthcare Hospitality Network, said she is eager to see what other improvements healthcare hospitality houses will make following the pandemic, because change is natural in situations such as this.

“All of us, I think, now have a chapter in emergency-procedures manuals for how to plan for a pandemic,” she said. “And that wasn’t there before, and I think it gives us the tools to plan. And while we hope that this never happens again in our lifetime, the chances are it may.”