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WELCOME

The Rochester Business Journal’s Health Care Heroes awards recognize excellence, promote innovation and honor the efforts of people and organizations that have a significant impact on the quality of health care in the Rochester region. The Health Care Achievement Awards were created in 2003 and were renamed the Health Care Heroes awards in 2020. The honorees profiled in this publication were chosen from nominations submitted by community members, who were asked to supply biographies, testimonials and materials describing measurable results. We thank all our sponsors for their support.





HEALTH CARE INNOVATION

AFFIRMING CARE INNOVATION

ROCHESTER REGIONAL HEALTH CHEMICAL DEPENDENCY

As substance use disorders remain an issue throughout the world, marginalized groups and communities have specific challenges that are not being met by a 'one-size-fits-all' approach from medical providers.

Toward this end, the chemical dependency department at Rochester Regional Health (RRH) launched an Affirming Care Initiative last year aimed at the LGBTQ+ community and its members dealing with the challenges of substance abuse.

"[Our aim is] to offer safe and supportive care to those in the LGBTQ+ community struggling with substance use disorders," says Emily Yanni, program coordinator for RRH. "[It] has involved a clinical revamp and creation of specialized programming throughout our inpatient and outpatient service lines."

Jan Leonardi, director of the chemical dependency department, placed her full support behind the new program as Yanni calls her the "driving force of our Affirming Care initiatives."

"We started with our commitment to serving our community and went from there," Yanni adds. "From facilities improvements, clinical expansion, training and the like, Jan has been supporting the

program through all stages of development."

RRH addiction therapy supervisor Erika Hirsch salutes Yanni's work in getting the program up to speed in her recommendation letter.

"She has worked closely with our medical providers to advocate for safer use practices, including securing access to information about needle exchanges for our patients who use substances intravenously, as well as obtaining testing kits to provide to our patients to reduce the risk of overdosing on fentanyl," Hirsch says.

Yanni has been with the chemical dependency department for five years, assumed her current role this past August, and was also picked as the department's liaison to the New York State Office of Addiction Services and Supports once the program launched.

"She has been a sounding board to different teams within our department, including assisting our inpatient rehabilitation units with ensuring that their facilities and paperwork practices meet regulatory requirements to ensure patient safety," continues Hirsch.

Hirsch also praises Yanni's skill at being a sounding board within the department, something addiction

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therapist Emily Kirkland mentions in her recommendation letter.

"She has, since the day I met her, shown a sincere curiosity and motivation to explore the ways in which she can make the world even a little bit better for everyone with whom she comes into contact," adds Kirkland.

"This has consistently helped foster a sense of confidence in those around her as it is always, without question, known that she will give her full attention and support when it is sought out."

Yanni emphasizes that Kirkland's efforts have been invaluable to the Affirming Care Initiative.

"[She] has been essential in all aspects of the work. She wrote a full curriculum dedicated to LGBTQ+ and recovery, surveyed patients, trained staff and has been an essential resource for everyone to come to for support with no judgment," says Yanni. "We could not have taken off with all of the program leadership and staff who have worked tirelessly to deliver on our promises."



HEALTH CARE INNOVATION

EMPIRE STATE SUPPORTIVE HOUSING INITIATIVE

EPISCOPAL SENIORLIFE COMMUNITIES

The Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative is a program launched in 2016 for New York state residents over 55 that are at risk for homelessness. Organizations across the state identify people at risk and start the process of finding homes for them.

A local example of an organization utilizing the initiative is Episcopal SeniorLife Communities (ESLC), located on East Avenue.

ESLC was the first Rochester-based organization to apply for and receive funding for the initiative.

"Through the initiative, [we provide] rental assistance and support services to frail seniors who are homeless or housing insecure," Sharon Freitas of ESLC says in her nomination letter.

ESLC's housing initiative team is led by Freitas, whose role is as the supportive housing manager and has been in the human services industry for over 25 years. She had stints with East House and Helio House before joining the organization two years ago as a program intake coordinator.

Freitas' coworkers call her the "shining star" of ESLC's program in a group recommendation letter, and note that she is often the first person to meet with a new program participant.

"Sharon is personally committed to the success of each new participant, she takes the time to listen and understand what is important and does her best to create an environment that supports their wishes," they say. "She is a constant cheerleader."

Support plans for the program are aimed at addressing physical, social and mental health, employment and substance abuse while concentrating on creating community connections and relationships.

"ESLC's philosophy is centered around 'housing first,' which centers around securing permanent housing for those experiencing homelessness and then creating a support plan (in conjunction with the participant) based on their personal goals for the future," Freitas explains.

The program helps residents at The Gardens at Penfield Square in Penfield and 270 on East in the city, and Freitas notes that most participants join the program from a shelter or a hospital.

"In almost all cases, participants have experienced recent or long-term trauma," she adds. "Since launching the [program locally], all 80 slots of the program have been consistently full, with little turnover, which emphasizes the need for these services and the success of the program. Most participants have been



chronically homeless over many years."

An anonymous resident of 270 on East enthuses about the program in a recommendation letter.

"There was a part of my life where I would stay clean for two, three or even five years but never maintained my sobriety," they say. "The [initiative] team supports me each day by offering activities, and health and wellness programs, while keeping me on track and allowing me to meet new people."

"I cannot imagine a better place to live than where I am now."

The success of the program reflects well on ESLC and their work, Freitas says.

"Designing the program and filling the participant slots has been incredibly satisfying, but there is no better professional or personal accomplishment than seeing the success of a person enjoying their home," she says.



HEALTH CARE STAFF KRISTINE BARRETT

DIRECTOR, RESPIRATORY CARE, ROCHESTER REGIONAL HEALTH, UNITY HOSPITAL

Kristine Barrett has been part of the Unity Hospital staff for over 20 years, joining in 2000 as a respiratory therapist and working her way up to director of respiratory care in 2019.

“Being a respiratory therapist has placed me in a unique position to advocate for the best possible care in the most stressful and difficult circumstances,” Barrett says. “Almost every day I am fortunate to be able to learn something new that provides me the confidence needed to lead and advocate for my team.”

That advocacy has been pushed to the forefront over the last three years, as she and the entire Unity Hospital team tried to navigate the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I was on the front line alongside the team as we navigated through the most challenging unprecedented times in our [careers],” she recalls. “We had to be very nimble and change practices frequently as best practices and recommendations changed often and we did so without reservation.”

Challenges rose not just for the patients being cared for, but also for the team based in the hospital.

“It was ensuring [employees] were well-nourished throughout their shift, providing the necessary equipment and supplies [or] relieving them from their assignment so they could take an overdue break,” Barrett recalls.

Barrett’s track record led to her being selected as the

interim director of respiratory care for the entire Rochester Regional Health (RRH) system this past September.

“This recommendation came from Unity Hospital’s president [Douglas Stewart] and Rochester General Hospitals’s chief operating officer [Jennifer Eslinger] who articulated to me my performance during the pandemic without a doubt has situated me to be the appropriate person to lead the system,” she says. “I have been able to positively contribute to the entire RRH system in this role, and it truly makes me proud to know I am making a difference.”

Stewart is quick to praise Barrett’s work ethic in his recommendation letter.

“She is thoughtful, authentic and engaging, and the department that she so expertly oversees consistently reflects these same qualities,” he says. “To her peers and direct reports alike, Kristine is seen as a humble yet assertive leader who values communication, relationship building, empathy and clinical excellence.”

Jennifer Gales, chief nursing officer at Unity Hospital, agrees with Stewart’s line of thinking in her nomination letter, noting that “many other disciplines count on her as their No. 1 resource.”

“Kristine is sought out and relied upon by many because her impressive vast clinical knowledge and expertise,” Gales enthuses. “She positively impacts every patient and family



member that she serves due to her skill, empathy and authenticity.”

Gales points out the multiple safety initiatives Barrett developed at the peak of the pandemic led to a steep drop in device-related deep tissue injuries, along with the standardization of various policies regarding ventilation.

“I try to empower [my team] to make a difference in someone else’s life, no matter how small, as it is my ultimate motivation for continuing in a field that is faced with more unknowns than ever before,” Barrett says.

Congratulations!

Episcopal SeniorLife Communities congratulates our Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative (ESSHI) Team on being nominated as Health Care Heroes under Health Care Innovation, they truly deserve this honor!



585.546.8400 • EpiscopalSeniorLife.org



Congratulations!

Maricela Pedraza (Medical Professional), Patricia Potter (Medical Professional), and Marisa Storke (Nurse) for being selected for the 2023 Health Care Heroes by the Rochester Business Journal. HCR is proud to have such dedicated and caring employees on our team! Our congratulations to all honorees.

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