Earlier this year, physicians and health care leaders increased intensive care units and ventilator capacity to withstand a surge in COVID-19 cases while also adjusting clinical operations and anticipating shifts in our response efforts based upon developing knowledge of the virus. As UIC’s academic health enterprise, UI Health has been at the forefront of the COVID-19 response and relief efforts through its establishment of community testing sites, launching clinical trials, modification of clinical programming, and providing expert guidance to policy and advocacy experts for the state. Similar to the experience of others across the Chicagoland area, the work done by our own care teams and staff at UI Health has been driven by our sound practice of public health preparedness and prevention efforts while building toward something very anti-climactic – avoiding a dramatic crisis that our regional health care network didn’t have the capacity to handle.

We currently have multiple active clinical trials that explore the efficacy of medications (and combinations of them) in the treatment of COVID-19. Chief of Infectious Disease, Richard Novak, MD, leads two of these studies – one that is investigating the use of Remdesivir and another that is examining the combination of Remdesivir and Baricitinib in treating patients with COVID-19. Dr. Novak also launched the first Chicago location of a national clinical trial for a COVID-19 vaccine. Additionally, Associate Vice Chancellor for Population Health Sciences and Professor of Medicine, Jerry Krishnan, MD, PhD, continues to conduct a clinical trial on the drug Sarilumab testing how it treats the disease. Dr. Krishnan is also leading a collaborative team across three health sciences colleges at UIC – named Predictors of Severe COVID-19 Outcomes (PRESCO). This project, in partnership with Verily Life Sciences, aims to understand the biologic basis of disease progression in people with COVID-19 and to identify immune-targeted therapies that could prevent the development of respiratory failure and other health outcomes in COVID-19 patients.

UI Health also is the only institution in Chicago that served on the Protocol Development Committees for three national clinical trials that will study blood clot prevention in patients with COVID-19 and will be the first Chicago site to launch these clinical trials. The trials are part of the antithrombotics arm of the NIH’s Accelerating COVID-19 Therapeutic Interventions and Vaccines, or ACTIV, initiative. UI Health also continues to solidify our reputation as a leader in community-based care through the work of the UI Health Mile Square Health Center – a network of Federally Qualified Health Centers in Chicago. Members across our university family, including faculty, staff, students and neighbors, activated quickly to mobilize critical efforts to keep our patients and families healthy during such trying circumstances. We are assessing how the COVID-19 pandemic continues to amplify the health disparities present among our communities – especially among neighborhoods and communities on Chicago’s South and West Sides. UI Health is addressing these issues with expertise from across seven health sciences colleges and our hallmark strategic commitment to serving under-represented communities in the pursuit of health equity.

As the pandemic rapidly evolved it became clear to us organizationally that we needed to listen and respond to the needs of our communities. UI Health started COVID-19 Community Think Tanks, which engaged over 600 community stakeholders in local communities to come together to inform impactful strategies and community needs to address localized disparities – especially among the Austin, Auburn-Gresham, South Shore and Cicero communities. We have conducted Think Tank events among the black and Latinx communities while engaging state legislators in these conversations to respond to immediate needs of our patients.

From the insight gained among the COVID-19 Community Think Tanks, Mile Square Health Center mobilized efforts around food pantry and community kit delivery programs. While these efforts fall outside of the traditional scope of a health care delivery model, we found these investments to be critically important to support and nurture the...
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The School of Public Health also has been selected to co-lead a $56 million, City of Chicago-funded contact tracing program in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The program, which is spearheaded by the Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership, will fund the creation of the COVID Contact Tracing Corps and the COVID Resource Coordination Hub, which together will hire 600 people to provide contact tracing services to all of Chicago to help stem the spread of the virus.

Additionally, faculty of the Occupational Health Service Institute, under the direction of Peter Orris, MD, MPH, and Susan Buchanan, MD, MPH and Susan Buchanan, MD, MPH, are providing consultation and educational outreach to a number of companies, unions, and institutes to answer employee- and workspace-related questions during the pandemic. This institute is working with wide-ranging groups including AbbVie, Baxter, Cook County Health, Cook County Jail and the Cook County Sheriff’s Department and others, to keep essential workers protected as the state and agencies continue phased re-opening.

The continued evolution of our activities most certainly reflect many of our lessons learned along the pandemic’s runway. We all often heard the phrase “building the plane while flying it,” and that most certainly rings true for our reality throughout this crisis. There has been little time to pause for many of our dedicated health care workers and staff during the past several months. Even as we committed our time and energy to the service of our patients and communities, we also focused attention and resources to the mental and emotional needs of our essential workers who have shouldered the burden of the stress and emotional toll of working among such trying circumstances.

In fact, leadership from our department of psychiatry established the COVID Emotional Support Line for health providers to support workers through counseling and psychological “first aid.” Callers have included residents, nurses and other front line clinicians and the feedback received thus far has been very positive – callers report that they feel better at the end of the call and they frequently add that the most difficult part was picking up the phone.

These are certainly not the only lessons we have learned throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, these are certainly some of the most influential and innovative ideas that have guided us on our journey this year. As the state’s public academic health enterprise, UI Health remains committed to educating the health care leaders of the future while pursuing health equity for our neighbors and communities across Chicago and beyond. This mission is even more important than ever as we continue to step into a world of COVID-19 recovery – and of course, we must keep listening and learning to move forward together.