



St. Mary's marks anniversary of start of COVID-19 pandemic

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Today, St. Mary's Health Care System will begin its observance of the first anniversary of the start of the COVID-19 pandemic by planting hundreds of white flags on the lawns of its hospitals in Athens, Lavonia and Greensboro. The flags will recognize the nearly 1,500 inpatients with COVID-19 who have received care at the three hospitals over the past year.

"With this observance, we mark a somber anniversary for our world, our nation, our communities, and our healthcare ministry," said St. Mary's President and CEO Montez Carter. "As we plant these flags, we invite our colleagues and our communities to reflect on how this year has impacted all of us and to look ahead to the promise of better times to come."

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, 2020.

"Last March, we watched the pandemic spread around the world. We knew it would get to our communities, too," said Sacred Heart Hospital President Jeff English. "When the first surge hit, our communities did a great job of flattening the curve, which was tremendously important because the virus was so new, no one on earth really knew how to fight it. We have developed much better treatments since then, but it's still vital that people continue to follow masking and social distance guidelines. We're not out of the woods yet."

"Our whole system ramped up in those early days and we've been giving it 110 percent every day since then," said Good Samaritan Hospital President Tanya Adcock. "When the summer surge came and went, we hoped we were through the worst of it, but then the post-Thanksgiving surge hit and kept getting worse and worse right through Christmas and into January. It was heartbreaking. Our faith in each other and in God was the only thing that got us through it. I pray we never see anything like it again."

The blessing of the flags at St. Mary's in Athens will begin at 1 p.m., after which colleagues will plant approximately 850 flags on the front lawn. At Good Samaritan, the blessing of the flags – about 250 – will also begin at 1 p.m. And at Sacred Heart, the blessing of about 400 flags will begin at 2 p.m. The public is welcome but onsite parking may not be available. Photos and videos will be taken of the events and shared publicly.

Each observance will pay special respects to the lives claimed by the pandemic.

“Combined, more than 130 patients have passed away at our hospitals of COVID-19,” Carter said. “These deaths have been tragic for the families and hard on our dedicated and compassionate staff, who not only provide exceptional care but also serve as the eyes, ears, hands and hearts of family members who cannot be with their loved ones while they are in the hospital.

“There are countless stories of nurses facilitating Zoom calls, printing and hanging up pictures, helping patients record voice messages, and moving beds so patients could wave to loved ones through the window,” he noted.

Support from the community has been extremely successful in helping staff cope with the extraordinary stresses presented by COVID, according to Foundation Director Ansley Martin.

“The outpouring of love from our communities has been overwhelming,” she said. “We have received thousands of cards from school children, goodie bags from churches, and full meals from restaurants and local businesses. There is no telling how many prayers and expressions of support we have been gifted. We are so thankful.”

Worldwide, Johns Hopkins University reported Tuesday that more than 117 million people have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and 2.6 million people have died, including more than 524,000 in the United States. In Georgia, the Department of Public Health on Tuesday reported some 830,000 confirmed cases over the past year, with more than 56,800 hospitalizations, and 15,600 confirmed deaths statewide.

“These numbers are mind-numbing. They are simply too big to process,” said St. Mary’s Vice President Mission Services Julie Carter. “But behind each and every one of them is a human being, and behind each of those people are family members and friends who are directly impacted by their illness or death. We are so thankful we now have three safe and effective vaccines that hold the best promise of ending this pandemic.”

“Our return to normalcy depends on enough people developing immunity that COVID essentially stops spreading,” said St. Mary’s Chief Medical Officer Dr. Jason Smith, noting that more than 31 million Americans are now fully vaccinated. “Vaccination offers a way to reach ‘herd immunity’ that, unlike natural infection, doesn’t put millions more people at risk of severe illness or death.”

In a message to all St. Mary’s colleagues on Tuesday, President Carter concluded with this: “Thank you for all you have done and continue to do. You inspire me. Your dedication to St. Mary’s and Trinity Health is a blessing. Your compassion for our patients brings joy to my heart. You have been – and continue to be – a light in the darkness. Together, we will put this pandemic behind us. God bless you, our ministry, and those we serve.”

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