FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 3, 2020

For more information contact:
   Ben Roberts
   Public Relations & Social Media Manager
   O: 229-312-5180
   C: 229-343-7499
   benroberts@phoebehealth.com

Phoebe and Public Health Work Together
To Protect the Public from Coronavirus

Albany, Ga. – With the first cases of COVID-19, a novel strain of coronavirus, now reported in Georgia, Phoebe and the Southwest Public Health District continue to work closely together to prepare for possible cases in our region and to minimize the spread of the illness. “People should not panic,” said Charles Ruis, MD, Southwest Health District Health Director. “They should know we prepare collaboratively for this kind of thing year-round. Through our coalition that includes hospitals, first responder agencies, nursing homes and other healthcare providers, we work together to make sure we are prepared to deal with a public health threat such as coronavirus.”

Phoebe has formed a Coronavirus Task Force that will meet at least three times a week to stay abreast of the latest updates and guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Protection (CDC). Tuesday, the task force decided to temporarily strengthen Phoebe’s flu season visitation restrictions in response to the coronavirus outbreak. The following visitation restrictions are now in place at all Phoebe facilities:

   Only one visitor will be allowed per hospital patient at a time.
   Only one visitor should accompany patients seeking treatment in clinics, physician offices and ERs.
   Children under 18 will only be allowed in Phoebe facilities to receive healthcare, not to accompany or visit a patient.
   If you have a fever, cough, body aches or a sore throat, please do not visit hospitals until you have been symptom-free for 24 hours.
   Visitors should use hand gel when entering the hospital to minimize the spread of germs.

“We want to be proactive and ensure we are doing all we can to protect the general public as well as our patients, visitors and staff,” said Steve Kitchen, MD, Phoebe Putney Memorial
Hospital Chief Medical Officer. “We will continue to monitor coronavirus developments and may make further adjustments as circumstances warrant for the protection of our community."

Phoebe is reiterating with its employees the proper protocol they should follow when caring for patients suspected of carrying coronavirus. “We have shared that protocol with our employees in multiple ways – through email and during daily huddles. We plan to conduct unannounced drills at our clinics and will have an online educational module that all employees will have to complete,” Dr. Kitchen said.

The Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) is advising other organizations to begin making plans for how they would respond as well, if the virus spreads to our area. “We are advising schools and businesses to think about how they may respond if there is a dramatic escalation in COVID-19 cases. Should they allow certain people to work from home? Might schools need to close temporarily to prevent the illness from spreading? It’s better to ask these questions now, before the illness hits our communities,” Dr. Ruis said.

Symptoms of the illness are similar to the flu. Dr. Ruis encourages anyone who has not been vaccinated against the flu to do so. “While influenza cases have decreased lately, flu season is not over. If you haven’t gotten the flu shot, you should get it now. That will help protect you against the flu and reduce the chances that we could experience an influenza outbreak and a coronavirus outbreak at the same time,” Dr. Ruis said.

DPH has issued coronavirus prevention tips that include:

- Wash your hands often with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with your arm or a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- Clean and disinfect frequently-touched objects and surfaces.

Coronavirus developments are evolving quickly. You can stay up to date on the latest information and guidelines by visiting the CDC website at cdc.gov.

###