

**OFFICE OF THE CITY COUNCIL**

**RESEARCH DIVISION**

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**CITY COUNCIL BRIEFING BY UF HEALTH JACKSONVILLE**

**COVID-19 EMERGENCY RESPONSE**

**Remote meeting via teleconference**

**April 16, 2020**

**10:00 a.m.**

**Location:** Remote meeting via teleconference

**In attendance:**

Council Members Al Ferraro, Ju’Coby Pittman, Ron Salem (other council members may have been listening on the call but did not identify themselves as present)

**Also**: Dr. Leon Haley – CEO, UF Health Jacksonville; Mayor Charlie Latham – Jacksonville Beach; Mayor Ellen Glasser – Atlantic Beach; State Senator Audrey Gibson; State Representative Jason Fischer; School Board Member Lori Hershey; Cheryl Brown – Council Secretary/Director; Jeff Clements – Council Research Division;

**Meeting Convened**: 10:00 a.m.

Dr. Leon Haley, CEO of UF Health, thanked the community for its support of UF Health and the rest of the Jacksonville health care system by means of providing supplies, food for employees, and other forms of support and encouragement.

He reported that UF Health started reacting to COVID-19 on March 2nd when it was just beginning to come to national consciousness, initiating the hospital’s emergency command center in anticipation of the virus eventually arriving in the Northeast Florida area. Planning was begun to convert additional rooms to isolation rooms (to a current total of 86, up from the normal 40) and several different predictive models of COVID-19 propagation were studied to estimate the local demand on the health care system. Testing was another major consideration, especially given the national shortage of testing supplies. Since the crisis has evolved, UF Health has developed in-house testing capability but is still limited by supply shortages. Workforce planning was crucial, including the postponement of many elective procedures to free up personnel for the COVID-19 response, which has a huge revenue impact to the hospital as those revenue-producing services are delayed. Visits to the general practice clinics are down substantially, but use of tele-health is up dramatically over the past few weeks. Some personnel have been asked to take personal leave or unpaid leave to balance the workload with staffing. UF Health, like many hospitals, is experiencing a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), but has enough to protect employees in direct contact with COVID-19 patients. Information flow throughout this crisis has been hugely important and takes place on an hourly and daily basis to varying types of employees and to the outside community. UF Health currently has 12 COVID-19 patients under care. About 900 employees are working from home.

The City and state social distancing regulations appear to be working, with COVID-19 caseloads in line with what the models predicted. UF Health and all the hospitals in the region communicate on a daily basis, sharing information about their caseloads and intensive care unit capacities, etc. They are participating in research efforts with UF Health in Gainesville, the Mayo Clinic, and others to keep up-to-date with the latest research findings on the virus. All medical school and nursing students have gone home and are not involved in patient care. The hospital is involved in community testing at several locations, testing both symptomatic and asymptomatic persons to determine the real extent of the spread of the virus in the community. That testing effort will be expanded as more test kits become available.

Most models show that the peak of the virus in Northeast Florida will occur in late April to early May, and will be much less severe here than in other parts of the country such as New York or Detroit. Consideration is beginning to be given to how to re-start normal operations, re-opening primary care clinics, scheduling elective procedures, etc. after the crisis has passed, but there are many considerations about how that will happen and what precautions will need to be continued as a preventive measure. We don’t know enough about this particular virus to know how long it will take to get back to normal and be assured that the risk of re-occurrence is minimized. UF Health did get some of the federal stimulus package funding and got some Medicare advance payments to help with cash flow.

State Senator Audrey Gibson complimented UF Health’s personnel for their good work to date, particularly their outreach to the community to protect public health. Council Member Ron Salem asked about staff that may have contracted the virus and about any medications that have proven effective. Dr. Haley said eight employees have tested positive but none have needed to be hospitalized and are self-isolating at home. The hospital is using several different drugs that are being used nationwide to see what is most effective. Representative Jason Fischer asked about the possibility of hyperbaric oxygen treatment; Dr. Haley said UF Health does not have a hyperbaric chamber so has not tried that. They are experimenting with different types of oxygen masks and helmets to provide the needed oxygen to patients without resorting to breathing tubes that have proven to be problematic in other harder-hit areas. Rep. Fischer asked about the hospital’s cash flow situation with regard to the restoration of elective procedures and the income that produces. Dr. Haley said the UF Health system will get through the end of the fiscal year in June without much problem and perhaps into July, but much beyond that will be problematic if the revenue stream isn’t restored. He said the hospital has lines of credit with two banks and is still treating non-COVID patients that are producing some revenue.

Jacksonville Beach Mayor Charlie Latham asked about media reports that the COVID-19 virus is particularly light and the 6 foot separation distance may be insufficient to prevent transmission if droplets from coughs and sneezes travel further than that. Dr. Haley said that he’s heard that as well and a further separation distance is safer, probably at least 10 or 12 feet. Shelly Boynton, a member of the UF Health board of directors, asked about possible funding availability for education and research efforts from the various stimulus packages. Dr. Haley said that he thinks more research funding will become available from the usual funders (National Institutes of Health, Department of Defense, etc.) but he sees less availability in the education area.

Lori Hershey of the School Board asked about the prevalence of the virus in children. Dr. Haley said to his knowledge there have been no COVID deaths among children in the Northeast Florida. Children are being under-tested because they’re generally considered to be carriers of the virus rather than victims of its effects.

Mayor Ellen Glasser of Atlantic Beach asked about the possibility of self-administered home testing. Dr. Haley said that UF Health Gainesville and the Mayo Clinic are working on home tests but there is still a high false negative rate and even if they were more accurate, it’s hard to know what to make of the results and what that really tells us. He doesn’t envision a true, reliable at-home test being available before the end of the year.

City Council Member Ju’Coby Pittman thanked UF Health for getting testing out into the community and asked about its budget challenges and what impact that’s having on other hospital services. Dr. Haley said the hospital got $71 million in advance Medicare payments that need to be paid back by early November, which helps in the short term with cash flow and liquidity. Hospital admissions are off 14%, emergency room visits are off 40%, so those revenues are down. The hospital also got $10 million from the federal stimulus package that is helpful. A formula that would be more Medicaid-based (income) than Medicare-based (age) would be more helpful and would better reflect UF Health’s patient profile. They’re looking to private philanthropy as a possible funding source to help deal with the emergency. Their Urban Health Alliance project to provide a multi-faceted program to deal systemically with the challenges faced by the city’s low income population was about ready to roll out this year but got postponed by the current crisis.

Council Member Ferraro asked if there is still a danger of people being carriers of the virus after they’ve tested negative; Dr. Haley said there is that possibility. In response to another question from Mr. Ferraro about what is the most important message to take to the public, Dr. Haley suggested 1) follow the instructions of the Mayor and Governor and stay home as much as possible, 2) socially distance when you go out, 3) wear your mask when you go out, and 4) wash your hands frequently. He said more testing is needed to know the full extent of the virus in our community. Dr. Haley thanked everyone for supporting UF Health and its employees in this trying time.

**Meeting adjourned:** 10:55 a.m.

Minutes: Jeff Clements, Council Research Division

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