

Cleanliness key in fight

*Hospital housekeepers
'fighting an unseen enemy'*

BY ERNEST HERNDON
ENTERPRISE-JOURNAL

In a way, the advent of the coronavirus hasn't changed what housekeepers do at Southwest Mississippi Regional Medical Center. It's just that the stakes are higher.

And, perhaps for the first time, the employees who keep the inside of the hospital spic and span are seen as what they are: front-line heroes in a battle against deadly foes.

"For Southwest to post our picture on their (Facebook) cover page was really exciting," said Sam Smith, Director of Housekeeping.

The photo shows a group of housekeepers holding signs that read, "We stayed at work for you. Please stay at home and pray for us."

"Hospital housekeepers have always been the unsung heroes of the healthcare system," said Dr. Kevin M. Richardson, Chief Medical Officer at Southwest. "Whether we are talking about the ER, the operating room or Labor and Delivery, our housekeeping team members serve a critical role in infection prevention and patient recovery.

"In the age of COVID-19, our Environmental Services Department has taken extra measures to ensure that our treatment rooms are safe for our patients — while at the same time following strict protocols for disposal of contaminated items. We are blessed to have a team of dedicated housekeeping professionals at our hospital."

It's not just the hospital administration that's impressed by the housekeeping staff.

"We've got so many people coming to us and saying how proud they are, giving us meal tickets and food," Smith said. "Thank you for noticing the hard work we're doing. That's what's motivating our team right now."

Smith, 38, commutes from Byram and has been at the hospital for 4½ years. Before that he spent 10 years in the Navy, then served as housekeeping director at two other hospitals.

He works for HHS — Hospital Housekeeping Systems — which contracts its services to hospitals. Smith oversees 68 employees for Southwest Health System, which includes Lawrence County Hospital.

"Our goal is to touch every patient. What I mean by that is impact them, make a difference in their rooms," he said.

"Every surface in the hospital needs to be disinfected and cleaned — light switches, door knobs, elevators, elevator buttons, floors, stairwells, rails, offices....," he said.



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Kina Jones cleans a room at Southwest Mississippi Regional Medical Center.

The essential tasks of cleaning didn't change with the coronavirus.

"When it comes to the level of cleanliness, we're still maintaining that same level of cleanliness," Smith said. "We do this every single day. We're trained to do that."

With some medical offices temporarily closed, the housekeeping staff doubled up in other areas.

"Where we had one housekeeper in ER every eight hours, now we have doubled that to two in the ER. That helps housekeepers keep up with the demands," Smith said. "Some clinics have shut down. We took that labor and those hours and we placed it in ER."

COVID patients are placed in secure areas not accessible to the public, and those areas get special attention.

"In COVID areas there are certain rooms called terminal clean rooms. We clean top to bottom twice," Smith said. "Terminal means a complete cleaning."

In such rooms housekeepers "clean every single inch, then do it again," Smith said, noting that's the same practice used in operating room suites.

"We've been training for something like this for a very long time," he said.

Front-line warriors don't go into battle without armor.

"We're dressed out with the proper gowns, gloves, face shields, face masks, shoe covers, hair nets," he said.

And that's not new, either. After all, coronavirus is far from the first deadly disease to enter a hospital.

"There were some cases before covid we had to wear all that," Smith said. "In OR suites we are completely dressed out top to bottom before we go in that room to perform cleaning service."

When a housekeeper finishes with a terminal room, he or she removes and disposes of personal protective equipment, washes hands, then dresses out for again for the next terminal cleaning room.

"As far as the cleaning practices, I told the team at first we should rely on our training. This is what we're training for. We know what we do when we go into a room," Smith said.

Becoming a hospital housekeeper even during normal times requires extensive training.

"It's a lot, really," Smith said. "If they pass our interview process, first thing they watch a series of videos."

Prospective housekeepers must watch around 30 videos, then score 100 on a test. If they don't succeed, they may retake the test or watch videos again.

Once approved, a new housekeeper is matched up with a "star housekeeper" for several days of training. A management team inspects and grades their work.

"They must score 92 or above consistently before going on their own," Smith said.

The upshot is clear: cleaning a hospital is serious business, coronavirus or not.

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"We have a big task. We're fighting an unseen enemy every single day, even before the covid," Smith said. "I kind of tell my team our job is just as valuable as the nurses and the doctors. I encourage them, don't try to place a number by your value on yourself. You may get paid \$8, \$9, \$10 an hour, they may get paid more, but your job is just as valuable."

Smith said being a hospital housekeeper is more than just a regular job.

"If you don't have the passion to do this — because this job is not for everybody — then you may want to find something else," he said.

The job carries over to his home life, too, especially with the coronavirus.

Before leaving work, Smith washes hands and face thoroughly and changes shoes.

"Once we get home — this is the key — I go straight into the rest room and I remove everything, put that inside the washing machine to get washed, then shower. Then I interact with my family," Smith said.

He admits the whole coronavirus drama can get wearisome.

"It has its days where I'm honestly just tired of hearing about it," he said. "I'll tell my wife, 'We're not going to watch the news for a week.'"

In these high-stress times, it's critical to find ways to unwind.

"I have my ways of spending time myself and making sure I don't become unglued," he said. "Just being in this environment can really take a toll on you mentally."

Nor is it clear how things will turn out, or how long this heightened condition of sanitation must continue.

"I think we're probably going to deal with this for the next few years, and we're probably going to be wearing masks for the rest of our lives — I don't know," Smith said.

While a hospital is inherently a place of disease, the irony is that it's kept far cleaner than other spaces —



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Randusha Reed makes up a bed at Southwest Mississippi Regional Medical Center.

thanks to the work of housekeepers.

"I believe the hospital is probably going to be one of the cleanest places to be," Smith said.

He's been impressed by the dedication of his staff. With the exception of one new hire who backed away when she saw what the job involves, no one else has said, "I quit."



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Rashanda McKnight, Assistant Director of Housekeeping, assists Viola Bloom in suiting up to sanitize a room.

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"My team that's been here, I'm really shocked that nobody's said that to me," Smith said. "We really anticipated some people leaving. Every member of my team, the people who were here before covid-19, have been so committed and dedicated to doing this job. It's really unbelievable."

Even the April 23 tornado didn't daunt his workers. "They showed up to work anyway," Smith said.

Smith said it's gratifying to see housekeepers get respect for the role they play.

"It's like the tables have turned a little bit on us right now," he said. "It's showing now that our job is really, really important, and it makes us feel really good."

His assistant director, Renee Haynes, started as a housekeeper at Southwest 12 years ago.

"This facility has very friendly people. I've met so many people on my journey here," Haynes said. "It's just a friendly environment to work in, and just being able to help and make an impact."

"My plans were not to be here this long, but once I got here and got grounded, after about my first year they started speaking about a supervisory role."

Now that the coronavirus has hit, the principles of housekeeping remain the same. But moral support is more important than ever — "making the team feel comfortable, letting them know we're here for them, we're here with them," Haynes said.

"Being out there does add a little stress because it's demanding now — just trying to manage that and trying not to have our team members overwhelmed."

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