



COMMUNIQUE

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VOICES OF THE PANDEMIC

When You're Put in a Challenging Situation, You Have to Adapt

Ivan Muñoz-Wilson is a relatively new Local 1180 member with quite a well-rounded and impressive resume. Now that he has spent the first part of the year working at Metropolitan Hospital in a pandemic, he even has an additional title to place on his resume — patient escort.

Actually, Muñoz-Wilson started working at Metropolitan in 2000 in a title that placed him in a DC 37 local, although he has been with H+H since 1989. He was promoted to Coordinating Manager A in Jan. 2020, responsible for utilization management, dealing with insurance company denials and appeals. He had barely settled into his new job when, on March 25, he was reassigned for slightly more than three weeks to patient escort, meaning he was moving the most critical COVID-19 patients from the emergency room to the ICU and other critical care areas within the hospital. But those weren't the only patients he was moving.

As a patient escort, Muñoz-Wilson was also called upon to move patients who passed from COVID-19 and take their bodies to the morgue. That's a far cry from other jobs he has listed on his resume, including amateur boxer and youth boxing coach.

"I didn't know being a patient escort involved taking bodies to the morgue. I thought it just involved taking patients to the ER and from the ER to xray or MRI or to ICU," he said. "The first few days, it was me and two other PEs. I heard a call for a patient escort needed to a certain unit for a body to be moved, but I didn't know it was a deceased body."

Muñoz-Wilson said in the beginning he wasn't sure how he would handle transporting the deceased, so he watched and learned from the other patient escorts. "I was quiet at first. I would say a prayer because maybe this was someone you knew," he said. "Either way, this just wasn't the norm. You don't wake up one day and say, 'I'm going to see a dead body today,' but I did see bodies. Sometimes you have to open the body bags because the

identification tags might be on the inside. These are people. They are someone's family."

It's that caring nature that makes Muñoz-Wilson not only a good boxing coach, but also a compassionate patient escort for scared, coronavirus patients. His first three days as a PE involved back-to-back moving of patients, but that transporting soon became more about supporting. In the earliest stages of the pandemic, patients entered hospitals by the droves—without family or a friend—when not as much information about the virus had trickled down to the masses. With 338 certified beds at the First Avenue facility, every spot was filled with someone sick, anxious, alone, and looking for comfort and reassurance.

With most hospitals short on medical staff and long on hours, Muñoz-Wilson said he would often take the time to talk to those patients who were coherent and ask how they were doing.

"I would try to tell them they were going to be ok. I remember one of my last patients because I got attached to her, even though we weren't supposed to. I happened to get the call to transport her. She couldn't breathe. She was in distress. Her nurse was from out of state and couldn't speak Spanish. The respiratory therapist couldn't speak Spanish. The patient didn't speak a word of English. The woman was saying she couldn't breathe and she was going to die. I talked to her in Spanish," he said.

"She grabbed my wrist and said, 'I don't want to die. Please don't let me die.' I took her up to ICU and she grabbed me by the wrist again and begged me not to leave her, but I couldn't stay with her in ICU. I spoke to her and tried to encourage her. She felt like she was dying. I told her 'you're going to be ok. You're going to be ok.' A few days later she died. She was 49 years old. I'm 51. Do you know how hard that was?" he said.

Transporting patients to the morgue took a harder toll on Muñoz-Wilson than others. His uncle, famous American boxer David Baby Vasquez—winner of the New York Golden Gloves in three consecutive years, former world champion, and Olympic Gold medal winner in the 1968 Olympics—was battling COVID-19. It was his uncle who started Muñoz-Wilson on the path to boxing and the man he looked up to for advice and guidance. When his uncle succumbed to the virus, it was like being knocked down in the ring. Muñoz-Wilson said, "it took a toll on me but I didn't let it consume me or control me. I needed my boxing because that's my therapy. It takes away the pain, the emotion."

Boxing has taught Muñoz-Wilson three of life's greatest lessons: how to be humble, how to have compassion, and how to have patience with others—all of which he has applied to his day job.

"When you are in the trenches, you've got to dig deep and fight," Muñoz-Wilson said as he compared the coronavirus battle to being one of the hardest fights he's ever been in. "Seeing patients you don't even know, you think of your family members and it tears me up. It weighs hard on your shoulders and your emotions.

"When you're put in a situation that challenges you, you have to adapt. If you're knocked down, get up and finish. You have to be stronger. This pandemic just makes you put things into perspective. It makes you realize what your purpose is in life. My purpose is what I do now, my work with kids in the boxing ring," he said.

Muñoz-Wilson lives by the motto that you leave an impact by what you do, not what you say, but in the case of his work at the hospital during the pandemic, he clearly leaves an impact by both his actions and his words. ■

We're Fighting This War for People to Stay Alive

Coordinating Manager Paul Escalante (Bellevue Hospital) knew what to expect when COVID-19 hit New York City because he was working for H+H during the Ebola outbreak.

"This was way more stressful, but it was the same type of panic as Ebola in the beginning with no one knowing what to expect," Escalante said when talking about COVID-19's early entrance in March. "We already knew about COVID, and when I came to work on March 17 and people didn't know that much about what PPE to wear or what to put on, it was like Ebola all over again. Some knew because they were working at that time, but some weren't. I let everyone know that PPE should be available upon request and that they should be allowed to wear it."

Reaching out to his Local 1180 coworkers is part of his job as a Shop Steward, but even if it wasn't, Escalante is still the kind of take-charge guy who steps up to the plate to help out wherever and whenever he can. That's why coworkers who aren't Local 1180 members turn to him as well.

During the pandemic, Escalante's trauma unit was converted into a COVID unit in order to help manage the huge inflow of patients arriving for testing and for those who entered the emergency room with positive signs of the coronavirus.

"It was just crazy. They made the ER into a COVID unit, moved regular patients into the pediatric ER, and moved the pediatric ER into a separate area just to have an entire adult ER as a COVID area. At that point, admissions was up the wazoo with patients," Escalante said. "We had to find a way to put positive patients with positive patients. We opened wings that were closed because admissions had been decreasing before COVID and we didn't have the staff to maintain those units."

Bellevue, which normally has 700 beds including psych, grew to 1,100 beds during the pandemic. The increase in beds to accommodate the increase in patients left Bellevue Hospital extremely understaffed. Escalante said that's when the Marine Corp. arrived to assist, as did doctors and nurses from other states, including Texas, California, and Nevada.

"Everything to me was just very surreal," he said. "Everything and everybody was moving so fast. I just went with the flow. I would think about Ebola and think about how we survived. It was just a race against time. This pandemic was very stressful and was its own race against time just to find beds for everyone."

He said Bellevue at some point was accepting patients from other H+H hospitals like Elmhurst, Lincoln, Queens, and Woodhull that could not accommodate their own patient influx. "Unfortunately, a lot of patients that were transferred to us were also passing away, which only exacerbated the already overly stressful situation."

Escalante has worked in H+H for 16 years at Bellevue, Jacobi, and Lincoln. He works in the Admitting Department managing the ER and the Admitting Office. Since he works the midnight to 8 a.m. shift, he is also the floor administrator for bed placement. Once the pandemic hit, his responsibilities multiplied as the command center opened and additional tasks were assigned to everyone on staff. As Union Shop Steward, he was the point person for members, and others, seeking advice and guidance.

"I have maybe 10 Local 1180 workers at night that I represent, but even non-1180 members came to the admitting office with questions and concerns," Escalante said. "Everyone was asking, 'Where should I go?' 'What should I do?' I had to be the calming voice of reality. I would even try to tell a joke once in a while so there would be a smile, some form of normalcy somewhere. I give my staff a lot of respect, especially the clerical staff. They still came to work when they could have ended up taking this horrible disease home to their families. Some even volunteered for overtime because some of the departments were short staffed."

While doctors, nurses, and the medical staff raced from patient to patient, the non-medical staff was just as overwhelmed, dealing with paperwork, facts, figures, and the myriad tasks that just seemed to accumulate from every nook and cranny. Escalante said everything came down to the numbers—how many patients came in overnight, how many were in any given wing at a time, how many were critical—"the more numbers I gave my supervisor, the more headaches were involved," he said. "I took this personally as an ongoing battle, as if I was at war. I got very sentimental and emotional, especially when one of my nurses passed away. It was heartbreaking. It was my day off, but all the nurses and clerks who knew him went to his room. People forgot about social distancing. Everyone was crying and hugging each other and grieving."

Escalante said the nurse's death, hitting so close to home, was a reminder that "we are all human. we aren't robots. We're fighting this war for people to stay alive." At the peak of the pandemic, however, death was more abundant than anyone wanted to think about, including the medical staff. He recalled how hospital attendings working 60- to 80-hour shifts would come into his office to sign a death certificate and would often stay an extra 15 minutes just to "get away and breathe."

When the number of deaths started decreasing, some of the reopened hospital wings were reclosed, a sign that let hospital staff finally relax, even if just for a second.

While the peak is now clearly in the past—and hopefully stays there—at one point Bellevue Hospital had several refrigerated trailers outside to accommodate the overflow bodies the morgue could not handle. Escalante said he recalls at least 90 bodies waiting to be picked up, and was relieved when that number was down to less than two dozen. Bellevue tried to give families as much time as possible to make arrangements considering the unique circumstances of the pandemic so their loved ones' bodies were not sent to Potters Field.

Escalante knows what that would have felt like as he himself lost someone to COVID-19. "The experience was horrible. You couldn't even give them a normal burial. You couldn't grieve. You have no opportunity to see your loved one at a normal funeral ceremony. It was emotional. But as I tried to help people, I could say, 'I know what you are going through.' You couldn't help but cry with them. But they said, 'thank you, you're an angel.' Losing people is part of a war. Right now, we are just trying to go back to normal." ■