At St. Francis, Technology Helps Connect Patients with Family Members

Virtual Visitor program supports patients during hospital’s current no-visitor policy

St. Francis Medical Center has implemented a new Virtual Visitor program for hospitalized patients who cannot receive visits from family and friends at this time.

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the hospital has a no-visitor policy, which has been in effect since March 16.

For hospitalized patients who would like to connect with loved ones but do not own a smartphone or mobile device, or have one with them, it can be particularly difficult. The St. Francis Virtual Visitor program is looking to improve that patient experience.

Here is how it works: The patient or family makes a request to his or her nurse to connect virtually with loved ones. The patient’s nurse schedules a convenient time with the patient and family members. Once scheduled, the St. Francis Informatics team is called to assist in connecting the patient and family using hospital iPads. The patient can then use any of the pre-loaded apps on the tablet, including Zoom, FaceTime, Google Duo, Facebook Messenger, Microsoft Teams or QliqSoft (the software used by St. Francis for telehealth video visits) to connect with their loved ones.

“The program has been very well-received,” said Shanah Orie, Informatics Manager, St. Francis Medical Center. “Patients and families are all so appreciative.”

Orie, wearing full personal protective equipment (PPE), stays by the patient’s bedside to walk the patient or family through the connection process and assist with any technical difficulties.

St. Francis Virtual Visitor program has 40 iPads on standby. Fifteen iPads were donated to St. Francis from Mercer County Office of Emergency Management. The remaining 25 went sent to St. Francis by its parent organization, Trinity Health. Each tablet is disinfected after being used and the browsing history is fully erased.

Since the program started last month, at least 20 patients have used the Virtual Visitor program. Orie is currently training St. Francis Unit Secretary staff to provide technical assistance to patients who opt to use the tablets.

LIFE St. Francis, the hospital’s program for the all-inclusive care for the elderly (PACE), based in Bordentown, provides adult day care services, healthcare, transportation, and meals to older adults in parts of Mercer and Burlington counties. Some of the program’s participants who have become ill with COVID-19 have come to St. Francis for hospitalized care. Most do not own a mobile device.

In this case, Janet Hayden MSW, LCSW, social worker with LIFE St. Francis, says the Virtual Visitor program allows for precious memories to be made between patients and loved ones.
“During this time of patients being isolated from their families, the hospital’s use of video visits has brought an immeasurable amount of comfort. It creates a connection that can be kept as a memory for the rest of their lives. Our families are profoundly grateful for the Virtual Visitor program.”

Orie agrees that the virtual calls mean a lot. “One of my recent calls was connecting a patient with a group of 15 family members from all over the US through the Zoom app. This is about bringing families together and giving support to patients and their loved ones. Anything that we can do to help our patients, whether it’s physical or emotional support, helps in our goal to help heal patients.”