

LOCAL

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Foul-weather friends aid JHC

Augusta Ayer lifts a box out of her trunk outside the Jewish Healthcare Center at 629 Salisbury St. A group of good Samaritans organized and delivered PPE to employees Wednesday. [T&G STAFF/CHRISTINE PETERSON]



Delivery of rainwear helps bolster Worcester nursing home's supply of protective gear

By Scott O'Connell
Telegram & Gazette Staff

WORCESTER — A delivery of sporting-goods supplies to a city nursing home on Tuesday shows the lengths those vulnerable facilities are having to go to find protection for their staff and clients.

Traver Clinton Smith Jr., a Boston-based attorney who helped organize the drop-off at the Jewish Healthcare Center on Salisbury Street, believes the approach could fill a critical gap in the equipment

supply chain to nursing homes in the state, which have seen more than half of confirmed COVID-19-related deaths so far in Massachusetts.

"This is not about trying to set up a 501(c)(3) charitable corporation," Smith said. "I want people to learn about the concept, and to understand that any single person can do it."

Tuesday's delivery included 71 rainsuits and 52 ponchos, normally intended for recreational purposes, that nursing homes can use as gowns. While not necessarily medical-grade, those raincoats, which volunteers purchased at Walmarts in the state for just under \$1,500, are

at least marine-grade, said Kate Columbus, director of nursing at the center.

"It is impervious - that right there makes it better than fabric gowns," she said. "It's better than what we have."

What the JHC has is a dwindling supply of gowns, which are a key piece of protective equipment for both workers and their elderly clients. Columbus said her facility goes through about 75 gowns per day, and tries to squeeze as much usefulness out of the gear as it can. "We use them until they're visibly soiled" or have become generally compromised, she said.

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The problem facing the center and other nursing homes, however, is that they are not high on the priority list in the protective equipment delivery channels that are supplying the front-line facilities dealing with the virus, including hospitals, according to Columbus.

"We're somewhat at an advantage because we're a not-for-profit," she said. "It's disappointing the prices we're paying, but we're able to do it."

But the center has also come to rely on donations like Tuesday's to bolster their supply - an approach that Columbus admitted she wasn't

sure is sustainable in the long run, although "it's working for now."

"We're trying to take it day by day," she said, but the challenges presented by the coronavirus pandemic have overwhelmed nursing homes, despite their preparations. "Unfortunately, that's what we're seeing now in the numbers."

According to the state's data as of Wednesday morning, there have been 7,044 confirmed COVID-19 cases in long-term care centers, and those facilities have accounted for 1,059 of the state's total 1,961 confirmed deaths.

Smith said he came up with the idea to scrounge sporting-goods sections in stores for protective gear because of

his background as a sailing enthusiast.

"I know how to keep dry," he said. "And I thought, what's better protection than a foul-weather suit?"

"It's not perfect. But we're in a crisis - we can't be choosers."

As of Wednesday, Smith said he was already in contact with another hospital in the state that was eagerly awaiting the next drop-off of donated gear.

"There's a number of ways this could work," he said, but he hoped some people might take it upon themselves to buy and deliver their own equipment to local nursing homes and other health care centers in need.

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