

Remarks to House Committee on Oversight and Reform

Thank you Chairman Clyburn and Ranking Member Scalise and members of the committee for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Dr Shanti Akers, and I am a pulmonary critical care physician that lives in Albany, Georgia. I have had the privilege of being part of this community for almost two years. When I first moved here with my family, I very quickly learned that the people in this town look out for each other. I work at Phoebe Putney Memorial Hospital. We are a 448 bed hospital in Albany Georgia and of those 448 beds, 38 are ICU beds. We are a rural hospital that supports the surrounding counties, many of which do not have a hospital themselves. We provide critical access to many in southwest Georgia.

As 2020 began, new outlets started to report cases of a new respiratory illness. Wuhan China felt oh so very far away and this illness seemed to be unlikely to find its way to southwest Georgia. When we had our first contact with Covid 19, during the last week of February and first week of March, we didn't even know it. We were informed, on March 10th, by an Atlanta based doctor that a patient we had treated turned out to be positive. We were shocked by its abrupt entrance into our lives. This virus had been spreading quietly for ten days. Very quickly, what started as one case, moved like wildfire through our community. We later learned that a funeral had become a super spreader event and very quickly, we saw case after case, flood our hospital. One patient became five then 15 and so on. We rapidly filled our 38 bed ICU capacity. We created another critical care space in a general medical ward. We started to board critically ill patients that did not have Covid 19 in our surgery recovery room. We filled medical ward after medical ward until we had at least 5 floors dedicated to the care of patients with Covid 19. We were forced to keep patients with critical illness on the medical floor as we ran out of space.

Those early days were scary and intense. We knew so little about how it was spread nor how to treat it. We listened for guidance from colleagues who had experience treating Covid 19 and a few details started to emerge. Covid 19 was possibly airborne. It caused a severe respiratory illness but also can impact the kidneys, brain, heart and several other organ systems. Patients required prolonged time on the ventilator. That was it.

Without the resources of a larger academic system or other nearby hospitals to buffer the case load, our community did what it does best. We looked out for each other. The hospital shut down elective cases to pool resources and limit transmission. The doctors and advanced practice providers did research and shared what information could be found. We had local construction firms donate n95's. Local churches and businesses, who had been forced to close in order to protect the community, donated meals to frontline workers. Our hospital supported its staff and provided free childcare to any staff member that had to work. Our hospital administration was there every day to make calls and went through extraordinary efforts to obtain equipment and PPE to provide to its clinical staff. What PPE we had stockpiled to last six months, lasted one week. We were and still are forced to make our supply stretch.

This time took a toll on all of us. Staff members caring for Covid 19 patients isolated from their families. We took extraordinary precautions to decontaminate ourselves to ensure we didn't become carriers to the people in our community or to our families. Hugging our children and loved ones felt reckless. I spent many weeks not seeing my children awake because the hours this pandemic required. I minimized physical contact with my family in case my PPE had not been protective enough. My husband bore the brunt of my absence but his unwavering support of me is what kept me calm through this storm. I stayed awake at night, even after working a long day, thinking of what we could try next to take care of our patients. I stayed up reading and learning from other people's experiences. Even when I tried to rest, it was impossible to avoid Covid 19. It was in the news, social media and on people's minds constantly. There was no respite.

Every day, a new piece of information came out, sometimes contradicting information from the day before. We were close to running out of critical drugs that provided sedation for patients on ventilators. I wish I could explain to you all how terrifying it feels to be that helpless. I have been trained to protect and care for my patients so that they overcome a critical illness. In spite of all of our best efforts, some patients died. No matter what we did, we couldn't change that outcome. It didn't matter if they were old or young. This virus did not discriminate. They were mothers, fathers, grandparents, children-members of our community. I have had to call families at home, some of whom were even sick with Covid 19 themselves, to let them know their loved one had passed. Some families lost multiple generations in the span of a few weeks.

Through it all, every single person who works at Phoebe Putney Healthy System knew we could count on one thing and that was each other. Day in and day out, we picked each other up. We mourned the loss of our patients as some took their last breaths, knowing that their families could not be there. We cheered with them when they took their first steps out of the hospital.

We were fortunate to receive support from Governor Kemp and the Georgia National Guard. When we saw the Guardsmen come into our building, a huge weight started to slowly lift. I cannot amply express how grateful and appreciative we all were for their help.

As time passed, we slowly started to see a decline in the number of cases coming through the door. Finally, we could pause and catch our breath. Our future looks different than we anticipated at the start of the year. Social distancing avoidance of large gatherings will be the new norms. We know another wave could come at any time but we are certain of one thing, we are Phoebe Strong and we will get through this together as a community.

Thank you for your time.