

A heartfelt "thank you."

Hurricane Sandy devastated much of our region as it moved across the Northeast nearly two weeks ago, displacing hundreds of thousands of our citizens; destroying a good part of what many of us remember was our Jersey Shore; leaving many of us and our fellow citizens without electrical power, water, fuel, or homes; and disabling our basic ability to communicate with one another. Without exaggeration, we experienced the greatest natural disaster of our lives. Yet across our state, in neighborhoods and places of work, we also experienced one of the greatest displays of human compassion and teamwork in our recent memory.

As this crisis unfolded over its first few days, Saint Peter's University Hospital, The Children's Hospital at Saint Peter's, and their sister facilities — all part of Saint Peter's Healthcare System — faced what not long ago would have been considered to be unimaginable challenges, including the threat of inadequate electrical power and undrinkable water for our patients. Yet our adult and children's hospitals and our nursing home met the challenge, providing our patients with every necessity and amenity they expect from a first-rate medical facility. Within days, our outpatient facilities resumed their daily routines.

In that regard, there are numerous people I wish to thank, and forgive me if I fail to mention a name because so many come to mind.

They include our Saint Peter's nurses, who proved once again why they are rated among the best in the world; our staff physicians and community doctors, who met the crisis with speed and devotion, making sure that clinical care was not compromised; our non-clinical staff and administrators, who joined many a nurse and physician working a multitude of shifts, meaning they slept overnight at our facilities for days in a row. And, of course, the many EMS and law enforcement personnel, who braved the storm to rescue and deliver to our facilities members of our community in need of medical attention. Each of these "unsung heroes" continued their work without interruption in some cases for days on end, in each case not knowing what was going on at home.

I am forever grateful to our healthcare system's sponsor, Bishop Paul Gregory Bootkoski of the Catholic Diocese of Metuchen, who urged and permitted us to convert the Metuchen Diocese's pastoral center in nearby Piscataway into a shelter for those who increasingly over the first few days of the storm came to our hospitals without need for medical care, but instead desperate for heat, a place to sleep and eat a warm meal, and hoping to recharge computers and cellphones — their only means of communicating with their loved ones.

I applaud Mayor James Cahill of New Brunswick and our city's employees, who showed compassion and responsiveness to our healthcare system's needs, ensuring that adequate healthy water was restored to our most vulnerable — the sick and frail — after water pumping stations had failed.

I thank our hospitals' utility provider — PSE&G — whose personnel took every call for assistance and acted bravely and quickly to restore electrical power to our facilities.

I note the guidance provided by Governor Chris Christie and his Commissioner of Health and Senior Services and her entire department as we navigated uncharted territory that was an unprecedented storm, as well as the work of the New Jersey Hospital Association that continuously provided all hospitals with updated information on emergency services.

I am especially grateful to the two volunteer fire departments from South Jersey near the Delaware Memorial Bridge who on the first day of the hurricane heard that our hospitals could be without adequate water and, without our asking, sent firemen and pumpers from the New Jersey-Delaware border to stand guard outside our children's hospital in the event of a fire that could not be adequately controlled given the stretched resources of our municipality.

With deep gratitude, I recognize Dennis and Brian Kelly, and their security services, APG Security, who worked with our healthcare system personnel to coordinate the delivery of bottled water, food, and other supplies as the crisis worsened, and those many vendors such as High Grade Beverage and the White Rose Corporation that answered our calls for support. I note that Dennis, Brian, and their security guards voluntarily worked with the Metuchen Diocese's heads of facilities and maintenance to set up our emergency shelter at the Diocese's pastoral center.

Appreciation is extended to the Vicar for Healthcare of the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago who offered to have medical supplies transported over land to our facilities if need be, and to the leaders of all faiths and elected officials who called willing to help.

During those difficult days, as I spoke with public officials and others, attended meetings of our healthcare system's Incident Command Center, and walked our halls speaking with nurses, physicians, staff and administrators, I met in each and every instance an extraordinary person. I will forever remember their selfless dedication and compassion towards others.

The heroism of the past weeks perhaps is best exemplified by the Saint Peter's Intensive Care Unit nurse who, three days into this crisis, said to me: "I don't know what I will find when I finally go home, but I know my patients have been cared for these past days." Her selfless attitude was matched by the calm measured actions of the leadership and members of our healthcare system's Incident Command Center, including our head of facilities, our security personnel, our chief medical officer, our chief nursing officer, our chief human resources officer, and many others. Their names — and those of countless others, including physicians, nurses, other vice presidents, managers, and staff, including food service and maintenance personnel who never left during a week-long crisis — will soon appear on our website in recognition of their brave deeds.

The heroism of many did not go unnoticed by the patients I visited at Saint Peter's during Hurricane Sandy and its aftermath. Well aware of the havoc outside, all were complimentary because they saw not one disruption in the excellent, compassionate care they received before Hurricane Sandy hit. So were the patients of other healthcare facilities we voluntarily sheltered during the storm.

The fact that we at Saint Peter's Healthcare System overcame an unimaginable natural disaster these past two weeks was hardly the result of circumstance or good luck. It was the result of the tireless efforts of a community of people united in the cause of survival, including those dedicated nurses, physicians, and staff who each day are the beating heart of our healthcare system.

Although Hurricane Sandy has long since left our borders, Saint Peter's Incident Command Center remains open to help our community at large. Through its proactive intervention, we have — and continue to offer — to our community physicians, employed physicians, nurses, all employees, each of their families, and total strangers — real-time assistance.

We have placed displaced families in our residential facilities; started and operate a "generator sharing program" by which those of us who have electrical power donate their generators to others; delivered thousands of yards of tarp to families whose roofs at home were damaged; and reached out to our donors, trustees, physicians, nurses, staff, administrators, and even those with no tie to Saint Peter's, offering our help.

Hurricane Sandy is long gone. Her devastation remains. And, as long as that is the case, Saint Peter's Healthcare System is here to help.

This past November 1, as it does every year, the Catholic Church marked All Saints Day, in honor of all saints, past and present. A true "saint" is the ordinary person who does extraordinary things.

These past two weeks, I have had the privilege of meeting many a true saint.

God bless.

Ronald C. Rak, JD
President and CEO
Saint Peter's Healthcare System
New Brunswick, Somerset, Monroe, Skillman, Piscataway, Manhattan



Treating you better...for life.