

MEDIA RELEASE

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Contact: Kristin Prelipp, Communications Manager and Public Information Officer
kprelipp@orangecountync.gov or 919-245-2462

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Orange County, NC is Ready to Strike Back at COVID-19



Team members pictured (left to right): Landon Weaver, Zin Lyons, Jim Gusler

HILLSBOROUGH, N.C. April 21, 2020 — Congregant living facilities -- long-term care facilities, nursing homes and group homes -- are at high-risk for COVID-19 infections. Anticipating the need for a quick response and ongoing support at the local level, the Orange County Health Department (OCHD) and Orange County Emergency Services created a public health strike team.

Launched in in early April, the strike team is comprised of staff from OCHD, Emergency Services, as well as representatives from UNC and Duke University Hospitals. The newly formed team brings expertise in public health, community para-medicine, communicable disease prevention and epidemiology to high-risk facilities. Equally important, the team provides ongoing education and guidance to those who work at these facilities.

Orange County Health Director, Quintana Stewart says, “We remain deeply concerned for the

staff, residents and families who are affected by this outbreak. This team enables us to respond in the moment and to be proactive as we move through this crisis.”

Orange County’s boots on the ground are Landon Weaver, community paramedic, Jim Gusler, Orange County EMS training coordinator and, Zin Lyons, a public health nurse from OCHD. The work of the strike team has been noticed at the state level. On Friday, April 10, Dr. Tripp Winston, director of North Carolina Emergency Medical Services asked Orange County Emergency Services to document their model so that it can be shared with the rest of the state.

“This is the ideal team to respond to the crisis. I call them my energizer bunnies,” says Kim Woodward, the county’s emergency medical services division chief. “They’re prepared to be in this fight to protect the residents at these facilities as well as any resident or visitor to Orange County.”

The goals of the unit are to assess, educate, test, and support. Initial contact includes a visit to the facility to assess their operations, and, if needed, provide guidance on sanitation and social distancing. This includes fit-testing of N-95 respirators, a type of personal protective equipment (PPE) used to protect the wearer from airborne particles and from liquid contaminating the face. Testing of all residents and staff may take place when a facility has two confirmed cases of the virus. All efforts are in line with Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines.

The communicable disease and epidemiology team at OCHD prioritizes visits with facilities that have been deemed to be at higher risk. Zin Lyons explains, “During our initial visit we do a baseline assessment of the facility. Do they have what they need in the way of information and personal protective equipment (PPE) or other supplies? If not, we provide both education on the spot and we work to get the supplies they need. Even if they seem well prepared, we want them to know that we’re here to support them. This is all about getting the right resources to the right place at the right time.”

Kirby Saunders, Emergency Management Coordinator, explains, “Being a member of the strike team has its risks, but the team members have each other’s backs. They supervise each other to make sure they are using best-practice safety with their PPE, suiting up before entering and decontaminating upon leaving.”

The strike team members are understandably tired. Yet they remain hopeful and their morale is high. “We’re lucky the county had community paramedics in place and already connected to community before all this hit,” says Lyons. “That’s made it easier for us to do our jobs: give peace of mind of mind to employees, families and residents. And, we’re here for the duration.”

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