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OakBend Medical Center CEO on overcoming Covid-19: 'The job of a CEO doesn't stop'

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In early July, Joe Freudenberger, CEO of OakBend Medical Center in Fort Bend County, was worried about his health system getting overrun with Covid-19 patients.

But right around that same time, Freudenberger began to feel symptoms of the coronavirus himself.

"For me, the symptoms were always somewhat mild — up until the point that the lethargy took over," Freudenberger told the HBJ. "That made it more difficult."

Freudenberger's symptoms included a fever that peaked at 101.5 degrees, a persistent cough and shortness of breath.

There's the physical aspect of the disease, and then there's also the mental aspect of Covid-19, Freudenberger said. He worried about what the disease would bring him tomorrow. He worried

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Joseph Freudenberger is CEO at OakBend Medical Center.

about his wife, whom he said actually tested negative for the virus but displayed consistent coronavirus symptoms. Freudenberger also worried about work — OakBend Medical Center was actively working to ramp up its nursing capacity to handle a surge in coronavirus patients when he came down sick himself.

Like so many others during the coronavirus pandemic, Freudenberger had to pivot to working from home while he recovered from the virus.

"The job of a CEO doesn't stop just because you're not feeling as well as you might," Freudenberger said.

Weeks later, Freudenberger has now overcome his illness and is back to more normal work at OakBend, a 274-bed nonprofit health system with two hospital locations in Richmond. OakBend's battle with Covid-19 has also improved some in recent weeks — about a month ago, OakBend had 50 Covid-19 patients in house and had 15 patients holding in its emergency department waiting for beds. As of Aug. 5, OakBend had 17 total coronavirus patients in house, with eight Covid-19 patients in ICU beds, a hospital spokesperson confirmed.

While the health system has seen improvement in its coronavirus situation, OakBend's search for additional nurses is progressing slowly, Freudenberger said. OakBend had engaged staffing agencies to find more nurses, but rates for traveling medical surgical nurses have gone "through the roof," he said. Some of OakBend's competitors have been paying traveling nurses $125 per hour, compared to the roughly $65 per hour a nurse would be paid under normal circumstances, Freudenberger said.

"We're not in a position to pay those kinds of rates," he said.

Meanwhile, the fight against the spread of Covid-19 in the Houston metro region continues. Mayor Sylvester Turner on Aug. 3 announced that Houston police will issue $250 fines to anyone they see not wearing a mask. Violators will receive a warning first, but fines will be issued to those who refuse to wear a mask.

OakBend Medical Center is the 12-largest employer in Fort Bend County, based on its 772 employees in the county as of fall 2019, according to Houston Business Journal research.

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