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<https://www.bizjournals.com/houston/news/2020/07/09/oakbend-medical-center-covid-19-nurse-staff-icu.html>

Fort Bend County's OakBend Medical Center needs nurses amid Covid-19 surge, CEO says

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See Correction/Clarification at end of article

A nonprofit health system in Fort Bend County needs more medical surgical nurses and more nurses to staff its intensive care units, its CEO said.

OakBend Medical Center, a 274-bed health system based in Richmond, has engaged staffing agencies to help ramp up the nursing staff, CEO Joe Freudenberger told the Houston Business Journal. He expects some new nurses to join OakBend within the next week, and the additional hires will allow the system to add additional ICU beds and to relieve stress on the current staff.

Meanwhile, the health system has moved certain departments to mandatory overtime and pulled nurses from other areas of its hospitals to assist in the emergency department.

"We're getting overrun," Freudenberger said. "We had, earlier this week, 50 Covid patients in-house. We've had up to 15 holding in our emergency departments waiting for beds. It has been a real challenge."

OakBend has 12 operational ICU beds that have been at capacity for roughly six weeks, Freudenberger said. The system actually has 18 total ICU beds, but OakBend is unable to operate the six additional beds without adequate nursing staff in place. Another 10 beds of ICU surge capacity could become operational with more nurses, boosting OakBend's total ICU capacity to 28, he said.

OakBend has been able to transfer non-Covid ICU patients — such as trauma victims and hemorrhagic stroke patients — to other health systems with more capacity. It has been "extremely difficult" for OakBend to transfer Covid-19 patients to other hospitals, Freudenberger said.

So OakBend has sealed off wings of its emergency department to isolate contagious coronavirus patients. Freudenberger said you'd find emergency department patients being treated in hallways if you sought care at an OakBend hospital today. OakBend bills itself as a no-wait hospital ER, and Freudenberger said he remains committed to that model of medicine.

"My philosophy is put them into the safest location you can," said Freudenberger, who became CEO of OakBend Medical Center in 2007. "Obviously, we can't transfer the patients unless there is a clear indication of a higher level of care. So the best thing we can do for the patients is put them into a monitored situation where our clinical staff have eyes on them and move their care along as fast as possible."

On June 18, OakBend was treating 11 Covid-19 patients in-house, Freudenberger said. On July 9, it was treating 43.

Across Fort Bend County, 111 of the county's 122 operational ICU beds were occupied on July 9, according to data from the Southeast Texas Regional Advisory Council. Of those 111 occupied ICU beds, 52 — or 46.8% — were occupied by Covid-19 patients.

Elsewhere across greater Houston, hospitals are stretched thin. Harris Health System, the county's safety net hospital system, has had to transfer ICU patients to hospitals in outlying areas of Houston to free up capacity.



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Joseph Freudenberger is CEO at OakBend Medical Center.

In the Texas Medical Center hospitals, 1,394 total ICU beds were occupied on July 8 — 104% of the TMC's base ICU capacity of 1,330 beds, according to TMC data. The TMC's data includes system-wide metrics from [Memorial Hermann Health System](#), Baylor St. Luke's, Houston Methodist, Harris Health System, the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, Texas Children's Hospital and the University of Texas Medical Branch, or UTMB Health.

Correction/Clarification

A previous version of this story incorrectly stated the types of nurses needed and types of stroke patients OakBend transferred. OakBend needs medical surgical nurses and ICU nurses, and it transferred hemorrhagic stroke patients.

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