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HCC RN student works under shadow of Covid-19



Tallon Tomasi worked on the front lines to help people with COVID-19. She is a nursing student at HCC.

Submitted photo

HOLYOKE – Amid the nagging anxiety, the routine provides some comfort: the vigorous hand-washing, temperature and oxygen checks, questions about travel and possible exposure, another round of hand-washing, and finally the donning of personal protective equipment – the gown, the gloves, the mask, the face shield.

Every time she starts a shift as an LPN in the dementia unit at the Leavitt Family Jewish Home in Longmeadow, Tallon Tomasi knows she's at risk. That's what life is like now, working under the shadow of Covid-19.

"Some people are scared, you know, because nobody wants to get sick," said the 26-year-old Holyoke resident and graduating RN student at Holyoke Community College. "Nobody wants to bring it home to their families and nobody likes to see their patients not doing well. Nobody knows how long this is going to go on. Nobody knows. It's

difficult, in that sense, but everybody is trying to remain calm and be optimistic and provide the best care they can."

Tomasi is one of 32 HCC students who will graduate this spring with their associate of science degrees in nursing. The nursing class of 2020 will have a virtual pinning ceremony on May 28.

Nursing homes nationwide have been some of the hardest hit places – "hot spots." At Leavitt, for example, a skilled nursing and long-term rehabilitation facility with hundreds of beds, "Everybody lives in close proximity," said Tallon, "and you need to get close to provide good care."

The risks are real. According to a family letter posted on the JGS Lifecare website, 21 residents at the Leavitt Jewish Home had died from COVID-19 as of April 10; and more than half of the nearly 300 tests conducted on residents and staff there up to that point had returned positive results, though many of

those tested were asymptomatic.

"When we first heard that we had it here, it felt like doomsday," Tallon said.

Patients were quickly quarantined by floor and later by room. One of the hardest parts is the no-visitors policy, though staff do facilitate phone calls and Facetime sessions for residents with their families.

Tallon credits facility managers for swiftly enacting strict safety protocols that give her peace of mind, and she appreciates the extra hazard pay and free groceries she receives from her employer.

The experience has not at all deterred her from her career goal of working in public health. As evident with the Covid-19 pandemic, she notes, treatment is often more expensive than prevention.

"I want to do something to help people stay healthy," Tomasi said, "to educate people about how to protect themselves."