

Our Man in Arlington

August 21, 2020 by [Charlie Clark](#)

Virginia Hospital Center, that core Arlington health provider that operates without our county's name, was focused on its massive construction project when the pandemic hit.

Passersby nowadays can't miss the towering cranes and steep wood-planked walls lining the foundation pit that — after years of negotiations with officials and neighbors — will allow the hospital corporation to add 5.5 acres of modern facilities to its existing 12 acres that date back to 1944.

"It's a substantial amount, given how tight land is in Arlington," confirmed Adrian Stanton, vice president for business development and community relations. "But in the context of hospital land across the country, it's not a lot of land."

The coronavirus has not delayed the construction (though the weather has) because the excavation phase is "all outside work in which workers are distanced or on heavy equipment," he said. "We've been fortunate" in staying on schedule for the expansion, the centerpiece of which will be a new Outpatient Pavilion providing easy access for patients from their arrival at the parking garage to the treatment area.

Like hospitals everywhere, though, VHC had to scramble this spring when the grim disease became increasingly real and local.

"Back in April and May, when Northern Virginia was a hotspot, we saw the highest volume of Covid[-19] patients, just like other hospitals," Stanton said. He credits the hospital team and area health officials for "not going with the same phasing as the rest of Northern Virginia" in resuming normal procedures too quickly. "That was the right thing to do, as our numbers have stayed down," he says, though many now worry about a coming second wave.

Too many patients with normal ailments stayed away from VHC's emergency room out of fear of the virus, back "when all this was new and the message across the country was to stay home," Stanton said.

Largely, the public obeyed the message. "We were seeing 50 percent less in ER patient volume daily and monthly," out of the normal 65,000 – 70,000 annually. Folks who, "instead of keeping up with chronic conditions such as diabetes, COPD, or heart conditions, heard the news that if you have other conditions, you are at greater risk" for Covid. So they stayed clear of the hospital. The impact on health "management created real issues, with patients coming in a lot sicker," Stanton said.

The bottom line now is that "a hospital is one of the safest places to be. We know how to deal with Covid patients, and we know how to use protective equipment to assure that not only patients but our workers are safe." That's not always true at retail stores.

VHC staff have encountered little resistance to the order to wear masks. "People are good, but the cloth mask is not safe enough for us," he notes, so all visitors are offered surgical masks.

The 3,000 employees on the front lines at N. 16th St. and George Mason Drive have been on the receiving end of gifts from "incredibly generous community members and community restaurants," Stanton said. The steady delivery of free lunches and dinners from nonprofits, corporations and individuals was appreciated in a surprising sense. "For the staff, who often don't have time to go down to the cafeteria, this was affirmation that people on the outside had their back. That meant more than a free meal."