



Lopez' greatest satisfaction is having patients feel well

BROOKLYN, N.Y. — Pharmacy manager Rudy Lopez has been with Rite Aid Corp. for over 35 years, but he says the most important undertaking of his career came just this past spring and summer when he was able to vaccinate less fortunate, underserved and elderly patients against COVID-19.

Lopez administered the vaccines through local clinics in conjunction with Brooklyn Assemblyman William Colton and Lina Chen, chief executive officer of the borough's Health Essential Association. They were able to vaccinate over 1,200 patients in settings like churches, community centers and senior centers.

His own pharmacy also answered the challenge of COVID. The staff came together to work on efficiencies to make testing and vaccinations "smooth and part of our work flow," Lopez says. "Our location has provided many thousands of COVID vaccinations this year. Customers are grateful for us being able to provide COVID vaccines. The strength and flexibility of my staff



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pandemic as well as the many questions patients have had on anything pandemic related. "We were able to help each other cope and adjust through the stress by sticking together, communicating with each other and feeding off each other's energy. The professional and personal support for each other has been tremendous. We became a closer unit as a result as we dealt with social distancing, mask requirements and helping our most vulnerable patients navigate the processes to get vaccinated and to stay healthy and safe."

Helping patients in his community has long been meaningful for Lopez, who grew up in the New York metropolitan area. Well before and right up to the pandemic, he took pleasure in working in communities in which he was raised, including Brooklyn, Long Island and eastern New Jersey. "These communities have been rich and diverse with great people, in minority areas, middle-class neighborhoods and beachfront neighborhoods," he says.

He sees access to information

regarding the health care environment as the greatest need for his patients. "Most are not able to get to their primary care physicians on a regular basis to address their questions or concerns. Since we are very accessible, it's convenient for my patients to come in to discuss their concerns as well as for their prescription and immunization needs. And now that we continue to expand into medication therapy management, we will play an even greater role in guiding them through their health and wellness needs."

Besides MTM, disease management and screenings, Rite Aid offers an expanded selection of natural products to help customers choose the best remedies for them. "These services give us a chance to answer their questions and concerns while we review their daily activities to maximize their health and wellness needs," notes Lopez.

He personally takes the greatest satisfaction in his job when customers stop in and say hi and they tell him that they're doing

well. "That is the goal — for health and wellness to be at its best for our patients so that they can continue to enjoy their careers, families and experiences."

Asked about his hopes, Lopez says he wants to see the pandemic end soon with as few deaths as possible going forward. "There are many families that have been hit hard by COVID, and I hope that no one has to go through an illness or a loss of a loved one because of it. Pharmacists have made a tremendous impact by being able to provide vaccinations, support and answer questions to help patients. We need to be ready to manage future COVID infections and local outbreaks and to treat our patients as they battle through the after-effects."

For the practice of pharmacy, he'd liked to see greater utilization of new digital technology to help pharmacists keep in touch with patients and keep them informed. "We have made huge strides in becoming more involved in vaccinations and

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Clonts will go 'to the ends of the earth' to deliver meds

Genoa Healthcare pharmacist Kyle Clonts started his career journey on the tennis court rather than behind the pharmacy window. Clonts taught tennis lessons at his hometown's junior college to a pharmacist who mentored him and encouraged him to pursue a career in pharmacy.

Inspired to help people live healthier lives, Clonts earned a degree in pharmacy from the University of Arizona in 2007, and he joined Genoa Healthcare in 2012. He currently works at a pharmacy in Gilbert, Ariz., that is based within a community mental health center providing psychiatric outpatient care to members of the community.

"We serve the mental health community at all different levels of severity at our pharmacy," Clonts said. "Their needs are the same as any other patient population — they want to be treated well and be understood. But many of the individuals using our pharmacy don't have transportation, stable living conditions or family to help them. We provide a bridge to help them thrive in the world."

Most of Genoa's 600 pharmacies are located within behavioral health centers, integrating with their care teams and providing specialized, hands-on pharmacy services to patients who require extra support. Research shows that when pharmacy services are integrated

with care providers, people are more likely to obtain their prescriptions and stay on their medication plans. That lowers rates of hospitalization and emergency care, and improves health care outcomes.

Many patients require a high level of personalized care, and Clonts' site meets those needs with prepackaged pill organizers, personal reminder calls to each consumer every month to evaluate medication issues and adherence, and other high-touch services.

"We treat others as we would want to be treated," Clonts said. "We don't worry about volume, we worry about value. Everything that we do provides value in a person's life. We know our client's medications and medical history, but we also get to know their personal stories and the barriers they face to staying on their medications. That way we can personalize our services and add true value."

The COVID-19 pandemic has spotlighted the need for ensuring access to behavioral health care, including pharmacy services, Clonts said. Anxiety, depression and substance use disorder have soared, just as many behavioral health clinics have wrestled with adjusting to remote or hybrid care and staffing shortages.

"Because of the challenges providers have faced, in many ways pharmacies have become

the primary focal point for many of the people we serve," Clonts said. "Pharmacists are uniquely placed to be accessible, knowledgeable and convenient."

Pharmacies have also had to make adjustments to ensure people get the support they need, even if they aren't able to see their care providers in person.

"We offer curbside pickup and free home delivery for those who need it," Clonts said. "For many, our pharmacy team has become a liaison between the patient and the community mental health center. We know each and every one of the people who use our pharmacy, so we're ideally placed to make sure no patient goes unaccounted for."

Providing COVID-19 vaccines has been another important and rewarding part of delivering value to patients during the pandemic, Clonts said.

Studies show that people living with serious mental illness are more vulnerable to severe illness from COVID due to poorer general health and other factors such as lack of access to health care and housing. In addition, people with behavioral health conditions tend to have less access to consistent, quality health care, including immunizations, and they face barriers to immunization such as lack of knowledge, access and recommendations from primary care providers. At the same time, research shows

that providing vaccination clinics parallel to mental health services can increase vaccination rates by up to 25%.

"We've been uniquely positioned to offer immunizations for frontline mental health care workers and those with highest risk in the mental health community," Clonts said. "We realize that the health system can be overwhelming, particularly for people living with serious mental health or substance use issues. Being able to navigate it can be extremely time consuming. If we can help make it a little easier, we do it," Clonts said.

Over the first half of the year, Clonts' pharmacy team administered over 1,500 COVID-19 immunizations, including to mental health patients who may otherwise not have received the vaccine. In addition to administering vaccinations in the pharmacy, Clonts helped schedule immunization clinics for vulnerable individuals with community partners on his own time.

"At the end of one clinic, I had administered 285 vaccinations, myself, in a 12-hour period and was exhausted, but I never felt better," Clonts said. "The gratitude and appreciation people showed was incredible."

Clonts' dedication to his consumers and profession was recognized recently with a 2021 Sages of Clinical Services Award, a program for United-



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Health Group clinical professionals that celebrates individuals who use their skills to inspire change, advance health care for consumers and demonstrate organization values.

"If I had to pick what helps me stand out, it's that I'll go to the ends of the earth to make sure patients have their meds, even if that means I am delivering them after hours," Clonts said. "What brings me satisfaction is doing something for somebody that makes their life easier and more meaningful, and being able to provide guidance, care and help to those who would otherwise have no one to help them."