



**BECKER'S
HEALTHCARE**

AvaSure

More Than Heroes

*Servant leadership and the promise of nursing's
bright future*



In early 2019, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, PhD, director-general of the World Health Organization, [proposed](#) making 2020 "the year of the nurse and midwife." The proposal was meant to honor nurses as healthcare's "bridges" – the crucial connective links between the community and the complex healthcare ecosystem. The announcement was well-timed, given that 2020 would mark the 200th anniversary of Florence Nightingale's birth, the woman widely considered to be the founder of modern nursing. Dr. Ghebreyesus' proposal would prove prescient, though it gave no indication of the devastation to come.

2020 would indeed become "the year of the nurse," testing the professionals who hold so much of healthcare together in unprecedented ways. The bridges would bend but not break. And by year's end, their immeasurable importance would be clear to all.

In January 2021, *Becker's Hospital Review* and AvaSure – a provider of virtual remote monitoring and telehealth services, whose platform has been used by hundreds of hospitals to reduce nurses' exposure to COVID-19 and allowed nurses to let families have safe moments with dying loved ones – convened a group of clinical leaders to discuss the effects of COVID-19 on nursing and the importance of supporting nurse well-being in the new year. Participants were:

- Deborah Cronin-Waelde, MSN, RN, CNO and Senior Vice President of Clinical Operations for MelroseWakefield (Mass.) Healthcare
- Regina Hymer, DNP, RN, Vice President of Patient Care Services and CNO for Louisville, Ky.-based Norton Brownsboro Hospital
- Scott Lethi, RN, CNO of Cookeville (Tenn.) Regional Medical Center
- Julie Mirkin, DNP, RN, Senior Vice President and CNO of New York City-based Brookdale University Hospital and Medical Center
- Amy Paratore, BSN, RN, CNO of Dulles, Va.-based StoneSprings Hospital Center
- Louis Simmons, Director of Operations at Atlanta-based Morehouse Healthcare
- Lisbeth Votruba, MSN, RN, Chief Clinical Innovation Officer at AvaSure

The following e-book is based on their conversation.

The 'war zone' and the road to recovery

Lisbeth Votruba, who served as an ICU nurse and a clinical nurse specialist before joining AvaSure in 2014, kicked off the conversation by looking back at last year. She expressed deep concern about the toll the pandemic has taken on nurses and emphasized the importance of ensuring these essential providers have the necessary supports to recover and thrive in 2021 and beyond. "If 2020 taught us anything, it is that effective leadership saves lives and nurses are effective, trusted leaders," she said. "I'm looking forward to talking about what can we do as nurse leaders to promote the well-being of nurses."

Dr. Mirkin stepped into her role as CNO of Brookdale University Hospital and Medical Center on Feb. 10, 2020. The Brooklyn-based safety net hospital saw its first COVID-19 patient less than one month later. It wasn't long before New York City became the [epicenter](#) of the pandemic in the United States, and Brookdale became one of the hardest hit hospitals in the city.

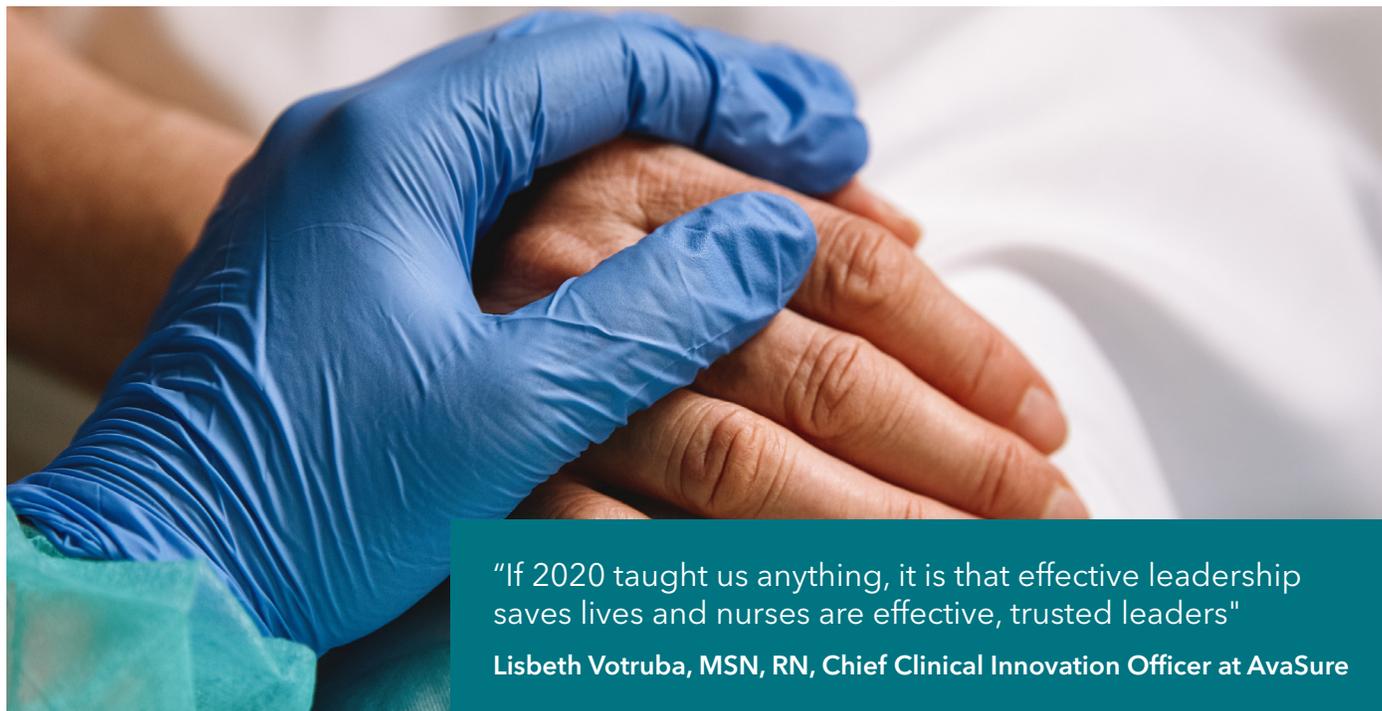
"In March, we became one of the very first hospitals to take in hundreds of COVID-19 patients," Dr. Mirkin said, adding that the only hospital in the city to see more novel coronavirus patients was Elmhurst Hospital Center in Queens.

Dr. Mirkin recalled the moment when the New York City Health Department said they were delivering tractor trailers to the hospital to help store the bodies of deceased COVID-19 patients. The chief nurse executive said she was in disbelief, unable to picture a scenario where they would have to make use of the storage space.

"Not only did we use the tractor trailers, we had to put additional shelving in them," Dr. Mirkin said. "The amount of death my team saw ... well, it was like being in a war zone."

In addition to patient deaths, several Brookdale Hospital staff members died of COVID-19 in 2020. "It's horrible to lose patients," Dr. Mirkin said. "But when staff knows someone who wears the same uniform and badge that they do who died from this, it makes it all the more real that they could die too."

As the pandemic raged through New York City in the spring, Dr. Mirkin said communication was crucial to keeping nurses apprised of changes to protocols. The rapid shifts and developments in the early months of the pandemic required consistent and frequent communication to eliminate confusion. The hospital took other measures to support staff, too. It designed a space called the "Zen Room," where staff could decompress or practice mindfulness. Members of the department of psychiatry made rounds to speak with nurses and offer grief counseling services. The hospital created a garden, where each staff member who died of COVID-19 was memorialized.



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Lisbeth Votruba, MSN, RN, Chief Clinical Innovation Officer at AvaSure



As the pandemic slowed in New York, the possible long-term psychological effects of the crisis became evident. Dr. Mirkin said the leadership team has started conducting what they call "purposeful rounding" to regularly check in on staff. The hospital also leveraged funding from the federal Coronavirus, Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act to bring on agency nurses to help care for COVID patients.

Dr. Hymer, who has served as CNO of Norton Brownsboro Hospital for 10 years, said in the spring of 2020, many of her nurses traveled to the epicenter of the pandemic to help support hospitals like Brookdale. At the same time, Dr. Hymer prepared her team for the inevitable spread of COVID-19 in the Louisville area. Norton Brownsboro Hospital shut down surgical operations and cross-trained staff from other departments to help support emergency department and intensive care unit nurses. Then came the waiting – the calm before the storm. "We were kind of left twiddling our thumbs waiting for the pandemic to hit our area," Dr. Hymer said.

When the first COVID-19 patient arrived in Norton Brownsboro Hospital on a Sunday night in the spring, Dr. Hymer said, "I need to go in there and be with that nurse, because we all know what that's going to produce for us and she'll be scared to death." The nurse took on this responsibility with great professionalism, setting the tone for the rest of the nursing department. In the fall, Norton Brownsboro saw a large number of COVID-19 patients.

"We saw an incredible amount of COVID," Dr. Hymer said. "Seeing that amount of death every day takes a toll. Our staff are doing well now, but this story is not over. I think right now, they're compartmentalizing what's happened. In a year or two, when most people have been vaccinated, I think that's when they'll sit down, look back and say, 'Wow, I can't believe I did that.'"

Mr. Simmons oversees operations for Morehouse Healthcare, which is a medical group that serves both major academic medical centers and ambulatory care settings in the Atlanta area. During the advisory call, he pointed out the daily burdens many Morehouse nurses face outside of the care setting. Many of his organization's staff are parents who, in addition to being caregivers, now serve as their children's educator amid COVID-19-related school closures.

Similar to other organizations on the call, Morehouse Healthcare's leadership regularly engages with its clinicians to communicate protocol updates and see how they can best support staff, whether it's through flexible scheduling or psychological resources.

"We are really trying to be there for our nurses, trying to understand how we can best be of assistance," Mr. Simmons said. "I take my hat off to nurses and to our clinical staff that have shown unrelenting strength during this time."

Leaders on the call said there will be no quick fixes when it comes to supporting the emotional recovery of nurses and front-line staff. The road to healing will be long, but healthcare's clinical and operational leaders have already begun thinking about how to walk with their teams down that path.

Servant leaders and healthcare's load bearers

For several organizations represented on the call, COVID-19 numbers were on the rise in January. At Cookeville Regional Medical Center, for example, approximately 27 percent of the facility's 230-plus beds were occupied with COVID-19 patients, according to the organization's CNO Mr. Lethi. "Right now, we've got the highest ICU census and rate of patients on ventilators that we've had over the course of the pandemic," Mr. Lethi said. "When this all started, we had one COVID unit. Now we have four."

In addition to making psychological services available to staff and taking other steps to enhance morale, Mr. Lethi has prioritized visibility and communication with his clinicians during the pandemic. He's doubled

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Dr. Regina Hymer, DNP, RN, Vice President of Patient Care Services and CNO for Louisville, Ky.-based Norton Brownsboro Hospital

the amount of time he spends on the floor during morning rounds and makes himself personally available to the nurses he leads. The CNO has also encouraged collaboration and communication between nurses across departments.

"We've tried to, for lack of a better word, just really enhance the communication and do more with our huddles," Mr. Lethi said. "We've had departments adopt other departments for things like secret Santa, just trying to support each other. We've had departments send in lunch to other departments just to let them know they're appreciated."



Interdepartmental support among nurses has also been on display at StoneSprings Hospital Center, which is about 25 miles from Washington, D.C. A large-scale staff redeployment initiated by leadership in the early days of the pandemic helped enhance the shared sense of collegiality. As a part of the redeployment, many operating room nurses were sent to the ICU, which allowed OR nurses to better understand the jobs and point of view of their ICU colleagues.

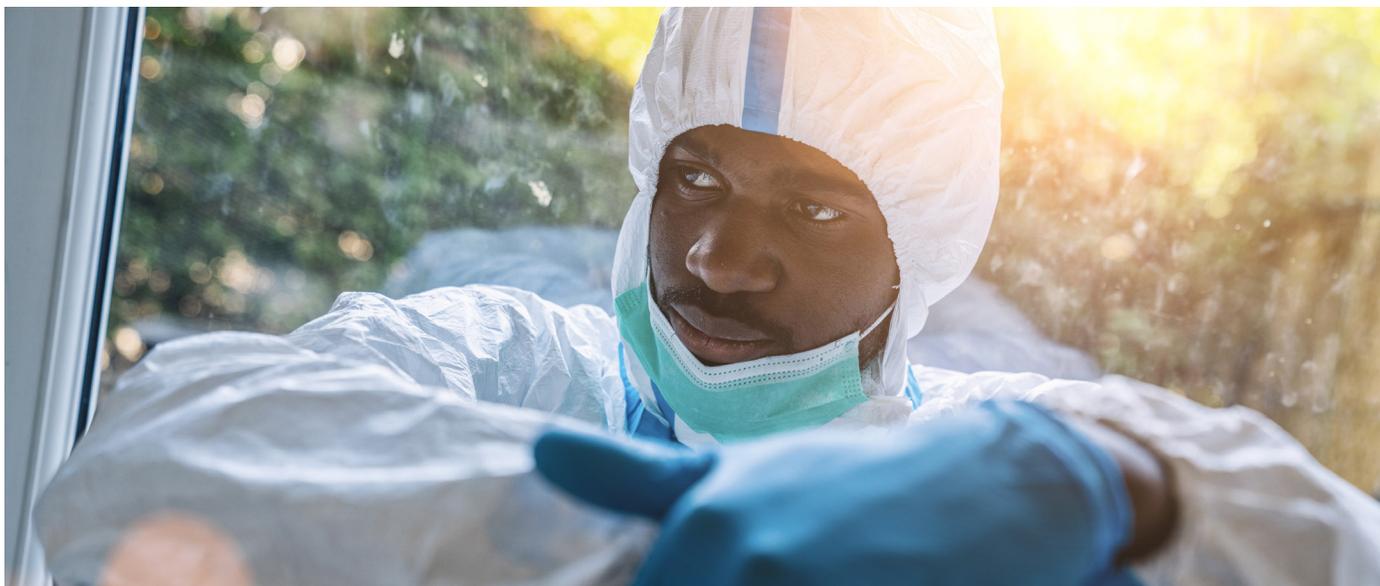
"I think it was really eye opening for our nurses to go through that experience," Ms. Paratore said. "Nobody likes to float [move from one unit to another], but I really do think that it pulled them together as a team, and I saw teamwork at its very best. That's been satisfying to see in what has otherwise been a very dark time."

The Virginia hospital's nurses have also been able to share their stories and thank colleagues through HCA Healthcare's Inspire App. HCA Healthcare is headquartered in Nashville, Tenn., and is the parent company of StoneSprings Hospital Center. HCA nurses developed the app, which allows nurse directors to call out the performance of nurses on their shift and allows nurses from across the hospital to communicate digitally with one another after a particularly hard shift or stretch of shifts.

"More than anything in these tough times, I think people just want to feel appreciated and recognized," Ms. Paratore said. "And the Inspire App helps us do that."

Ms. Cronin-Waelde said the actions of her peers on the advisory call marked a commitment to servant leadership, which she embraces in her work at MelroseWakefield Healthcare. Servant leadership requires open communication, availability, visibility within the organization and humility. "Being there for our teams in the moment, being there seven days a week, that's just been the norm since March 2020," Ms. Cronin-Waelde said, adding that she tries to empower her team with a sense of the importance of the work they're doing in the context of history and the evolution of healthcare.

"The voice of the nurse has never been more prominent or valuable. I try to message that to our nurses to let them know they are truly making history," Ms. Cronin-Waelde said. "I tell them, 'Your children, your grandchildren will look back at 2020 and 2021 and say you made history, you saved lives.'"



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Amy Paratore, BSN, RN, CNO of Dulles, Va.-based StoneSprings Hospital Center



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Julie Mirkin, DNP, RN, Senior Vice President and CNO of New York City-based Brookdale University Hospital and Medical Center

More than heroes – A brighter future for nursing

Ms. Cronin-Waelde pointed out that the word "hero" is often used to describe nurses. While this is true and well-intentioned, the sentiment does not fully encapsulate all the work done by nurses. Florence Nightingale herself was a pioneer in data visualization and hospital improvements. Amid the pandemic, nurses are serving as infectious disease experts, innovators and patient advocates. "They show up to work exhausted every day ... they stand up testing sites, they develop plexiglass barriers that allow clinicians to swab someone without having to waste PPE," Ms. Cronin-Waelde said. "They're innovators. And leaders at the top are coming to nurses for ideas."

The historical nature of front-line providers' heroism amid the pandemic is also drawing new talent to the nursing profession. Dr. Mirkin, who also serves as a clinical professor at Stony Brook (N.Y.) School of Nursing, said the freshmen she interacts with often ask how they can help support nurses at her hospital. The university has also seen a significant uptick in the number of students who want to join the nursing program.

"They want to be a part of this. They want to be a part of the solution. They're running toward nursing, not away from it," Dr. Mirkin said. "The future of nursing is bright, brighter than it's ever been."

At the beginning of the advisory call, Ms. Votruba shared the words of encouragement one of her nursing mentors gave her early in her career. "She told me that the nursing profession shapes you, and that you, in turn, have a duty to shape the nursing profession," Ms. Votruba said, who herself works to shape the profession by furthering AvaSure's vision for innovative inpatient telehealth while advocating for patient and nurse safety.

The nurses working today, perhaps more than any other generation of nurses, are reshaping the profession. They're serving as healthcare's essential bridges, connecting patients to the care they need amid a crisis. And, as always, they're saving lives. ■

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