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Weber Gallagher Partner, Suzanne Utke, Turns to Her Nursing Roots and Lends a Hand to Treat COVID-19 Patients

During the COVID-19 pandemic in Philadelphia, you can find Weber Gallagher's Suzanne Utke lending a helping hand to treat COVID-19 patients by volunteering with the Philadelphia Medical Reserve Corps. Less than a month ago, Suzanne was defending her clients against medical malpractice claims out of the firm's Philadelphia office.

Before joining Weber Gallagher, Suzanne spent over 20 years as a nurse, and was also a nursing supervisor, at major teaching hospitals in Philadelphia. "For my entire life, I knew my destiny would be in the medical field. For over 20 years, I worked as an ICU/ED nurse, and was a Nursing Supervisor. Diving into medical malpractice defense was a natural progression when I came to the realization that my body would only hold out for so long," stated Suzanne Utke when asked about keeping her nursing license. "Nursing is a very physically and emotionally taxing career, but it is also a very rewarding vocation. I was called to do this and for this reason, I still maintain an active nursing license – just in case I could help again."

Suzanne has also assisted through the Red Cross during past disasters like 9/11, Sandy, and Katrina because she continues to keep her nursing license active while practicing law. After seeing and hearing about the toll COVID-19 was taking on her friends and family in the medical profession, Suzanne decided it was time for her to step in and offer her support. Suzanne now volunteers with the Philadelphia Medical Reserve Corps where she is assisting with several important initiatives to help the Philadelphia community manage the COVID-19 crisis.

Suzanne is currently working out of a field hospital that was developed and created at the Liacouras Center to accept patients from hospitals that are at capacity and need relief. Suzanne's volunteer work includes a number of tasks including Nursing Supervision, Infection Control Management, and participation in a "Leadership Think Tank" with the Director of Supply and Distribution in order to identify the needs and supplies necessary to care for COVID-19 patients within the arena, on a basketball court at the Liacouras Center at Temple University's field hospital.

Due to the specific needs and hazards associated with the coronavirus, particular measures and protocols needed put in place which Suzanne helped develop and implement. To transform the Liacouras Center into a hospital-type venue, measures had to be taken such as bringing electricity and oxygen to each bed without causing a trip hazard, and solving problems like creating headboards to mount gloves, needle boxes, hand sanitizer, and more, behind the beds to minimize patient to patient contamination or risks to the staff. A triage center was created off the loading dock for arriving patients, and Suzanne was involved in developing measures and implementing them to prevent cross-infection for non-patient deliveries with the ambulances arriving with new patients. Areas were also created for staff locker rooms, a staff PPE prep room, a dietary center, and a code room. Other essential items were also added, such as pharmacy carts and computers to enter electronic medical records synchronized with Temple Health System's medical records system.

Suzanne spent her first week volunteering by "building" the hospital, and creating and implementing safety and infection control measures for the 152-bed unit at Liacouras. The patients sent to this location were to be relatively stable, but still too ill to go home, still having a supplemental oxygen requirement. Once this facility started accepting patients, Suzanne took responsibility for triage, infection prevention, and supervising other Nurses and Medical Assistants. She plans to work two to three 12 hour shifts per week, mostly on the weekends, so she can keep up with her legal caseload.

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“I am so honored to have been given the okay to do this by the Firm. It is an amazing opportunity to be a part of the solution,” said Suzanne about the opportunity as she shared her story with the firm.

“Weber Gallagher is proud to have someone as dedicated as Suzanne as part of our team,” noted Andrew Indeck, Firm Chair. “We thank Suzanne and all other front line workers who are helping fight this virus so our communities can get healthy.”



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