

Home Health and Hospice Heroes

Wildfire, power outage, or flood: When disaster strikes, Kaiser Permanente home health care professionals get the job done.

As a home health physical therapist, Lisa Curry has been bitten by dogs and chased by a tortoise.

Catherine del Rosario, RN, often works midnight to 8 a.m., caring for dying patients in their homes and consoling grieving families.

Kaiser Permanente Northern California's 1,250 home health and hospice caregivers have a difficult job, even during the best of times. But when disasters strike, they often must improvise, tapping reserves of compassion and perseverance to ensure the 3,600 members who are seen at home get quality care.

"We all have stories to tell when a disaster comes," said Kaiser Permanente Northern California Home Health Director Edith Klecker. "And everyone brings their A game."

Working by Flashlight

October 10 was one of those days. The power was out on the rugged coast south of San Francisco. Del Rosario was working overnight when she got the call that her hospice patient in the seaside town of El Granada had died at home.

She would have to make the drive over the coastal mountain range in the middle of the night on a winding road from Hayward in an eeriness only a widespread power outage brings.

"I'm used to working at night, but this night the street lights were out and all the stop lights were just blinking," said del Rosario. "In my mind and heart, there was fear, but I was also thinking about the family members who were grieving, and suffering, and in pain. That gave me strength to go."

With a battery powered headlamp and a flashlight, she listened to the patient's heart, took his blood pressure, and verified he was dead. Then she closed his eyes, prepared the body, and stayed to talk with the family.

"This is a different challenge of nursing," del Rosario said. "They needed my help, so I went."

Undaunted by Fire, Evacuation

On October 23, Kaiser Permanente member Allan Tilton had a total knee replacement surgery at

the Santa Rosa Medical Center. The same day, the Kincade Fire roared to life, just north of Santa Rosa, eventually burning 77,000 acres and threatening the city for the second time in three years. Three days later under evacuation orders at 3 a.m. Tilton, rushed out the door with his wife, forgetting the ice machine that kept his knee from swelling.

After finding a hotel in Vallejo at about 7 a.m., his knee began to swell and bleed. Doctors at the Kaiser Permanente Vallejo Medical Center Emergency Department treated him and he went home, despite the ongoing evacuation order.

A follow-up examination at home was essential.

“I was supposed to see him, but I couldn’t do it in the evacuation zone,” said Curry.

Improvising a solution, she called Tilton. He agreed to drive from his home in the evacuation zone to the Kaiser Permanente Mercury Way Medical Offices in Santa Rosa, outside the evacuation zone. The offices were bustling with people displaced from the evacuated Santa Rosa Medical Center. Adding to the crowd was an emergency free food distribution in the parking lot with California Gov. Gavin Newsom.

“He said, ‘I’ll be wearing a red shirt,’” Curry recalled. “We met in the lobby and both went up to the information desk, explained who we were, and asked about finding a more private area to change his dressing. They found us the perfect place in an open treatment room.”

She changed Tilton’s dressing, checked his range of motion, and showed him the exercises he needed to keep his knee healthy.

“I was impressed she was able to get us in there on that crazy day and find a place for me to be seen,” Tilton said. “She was bending over backward to find a way to make it work.”

For Curry, it was all in a day’s work.

“I just felt like I really needed to see this patient,” Curry added. “So, we made it happen.”