

COVID-19 PANDEMIC SPECIAL REPORT



Maria Barajas, a COVID-19 patient in the intensive care unit, received oxygen as she was isolated in a room at Bakersfield Memorial Hospital on Friday. See more photos in a gallery online at Bakersfield.com.

MORE ANXIETY, MORE SICKNESS, MORE STRESS

Inside Bakersfield Memorial Hospital as infections surge, filling medical facilities throughout the city

STORY BY STACEY SHEPARD • PHOTOS BY ALEX HORVATH

From outside the sliding glass doors of an ICU room on the third floor of Bakersfield Memorial Hospital, nurse Jaelyn Moore peered in at a patient.

The woman, a COVID-19 patient connected to a breathing machine, had been shifting her head back and forth moments earlier. Now, she seemed calm.

"It's the first time all day she doesn't seem uncomfortable," Moore said.

It was noon and quiet in the unit, one of two in the hospital that has eight intensive care beds for the sickest COVID-19 patients. Almost every bed was occupied. Two other units in the hospital held about 45 less critical COVID-19 patients.

The hallways are sparse but the hospital is teeming with close to 60 COVID-19 patients, many struggling to breathe



Respiratory therapist Olivia Luevano checks a patient's records before entering the room in Bakersfield Memorial Hospital's COVID-19 ICU on Friday. The hospital has 16 ICU beds for COVID-19 patients and 14 were occupied on Friday.

and maintain oxygen saturation in their blood. Nurses, nurse assistants and respiratory therapists, wearing yellow paper coats, masked

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INSIDE

In late April, when the coronavirus was just getting a foothold in Kern County and local hospitals were empty, two respiratory therapists who work for Adventist Health Bakersfield headed to New York City. They talk about their experiences. **Page A3**

ENTERTAINMENT DISTRICT

City eyes 'final piece' of vision for Mill Creek

Council moves to develop property near Maya Cinemas

BY SAM MORGEN
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After years of starts and stops, the city of Bakersfield is ready to complete the "final piece" of a plan to revitalize a portion of downtown.

In a recent meeting, the City Council moved forward with the development of a lot that's stood vacant for years across the street from Maya Cinemas. The theater chain owner, Moctesuma Esparza, has proposed a sprawling entertainment district for the lot, and city officials have thrown their support behind the project.

Although still in the early planning stages, the entertainment district could radically transform the underdeveloped area, and help throngs of people return to downtown.

"I've been thinking about it since the first day I joined the council," Councilman Andrae Gonzales said of the lot, which is known as the PQ Property for the streets that run along its western side. "I created a long list of projects that I wanted to complete, and this was one of my highest priorities."

Since the early 2000s, the city's hoped to create a thriving entertainment region in the area around Mill Creek. Valley Children's

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TRACK AND FIELD



All in the family

Alicia and Daniel Viveros, siblings and former Liberty stars, share in successes despite being at rival colleges **SPORTS | D1**

ROBERT PRICE

Exactly 100 days out, David Valadao charts a course that keeps Trump at a safe distance **LOCAL | A5**

PATRICIA ALATORRE

Mourners remember girl, 13, as 'a star that shined and brightens up your day' **LOCAL | A5**

EDUCATION

Incoming college freshmen prepare for a different first-year experience

BY EMA SASIC
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Going off to college can be a nerve-racking moment, but Savannah Pappe has always looked forward to it because she'd be starting life on her own.

Knowing she wanted to study French in college, she found her match with Cal State Long Beach. Home wouldn't be too far away, and she could start enjoying life in a new city, surrounded by new people. She even reached out to various clubs on campus and professors.

But then things changed in mid-May: The California State University system announced classes would be mainly virtual for the fall semester.

"I was frustrated because I really, really, really wanted to be on my own," Pappe said. Instead, she will be completing her online classes from her home in Bakersfield.

As several universities in California plan to start the year with distance learning, incoming freshmen are grappling with losing out on that full college experience.

CLOSER TO HOME THAN ANTICIPATED

Terran Fielder originally had her eyes set on New York's Hofstra University and was ready to board a plane right before COVID-19 news had spread. Not wanting to risk her health, she decided to stay home, and upon further research, the school "ended up not being the right fit."

UC Davis was, however, and she will study political science and theater and dance.

The university recently announced that classes under 50 students will be held in person, while larger classes will be online, and that classes would not begin until Sept. 30. Fielder is waiting to learn if she was accepted in dance courses, which would be held in person. That would determine where she would be in the fall: on campus or at home.

"When you're dancing, it's hard on your body unless you have the proper flooring for jumping and turning," Fielder explained. "I can't afford to purchase one for a couple

Please see **COLLEGE | A4**



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

Incoming college freshmen are grappling with losing out on the full college experience when school begins in several weeks. Clockwise, from top left: Terran Fielder, Jackson Napier, Chloe Brunswick and Savannah Pappe.



PRICE: \$2

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OUTSIDE TODAY

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HIGH **102** LOW **75**
AIR QUALITY **105** | Unhealthy

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ALEX HORVATH / THE CALIFORNIAN

Nurse Jaclyn Moore checks on a patient in a Bakersfield Memorial Hospital COVID-19 ICU on Friday. The hospital has 16 COVID-19 ICU beds and 14 were in use.

HOSPITAL

Continued from PAGE A1

and donning face shields, are busy logging patient updates into computers and entering the rooms of patients, many of whom require constant vigilance.

It's not like the scenes from New York with patients in hallways and people rushing to tend to them. Not yet, anyway. But every so often, the scattered yellow coats come together at one room in a flurry of activity. A patient struggling to breathe, their oxygen level plummeting. Or their blood pressure crashing.

"There's definitely a lot more anxiety," Moore said. "It's easy to see something happening and run into a room and then, crap, I forgot my face shield."

Moore said she's lost weight in recent weeks from the sheer intensity required on her shifts.



Nurse Tina Ndifor checks a patient's records before tending to the patient in a COVID-19 unit on Friday. Medical facilities in Kern County are being pushed to the limit as more and more people contract COVID-19.

As Bakersfield's hospitals fill up, the work of hospital staff, from doctors and nurses to janitors and kitchen workers, has become exhausting and overwhelming. With COVID-19 raging throughout Kern County, these workers arrive to work each day to find more people in beds, who are sicker than typical hospital patients and suffering alone without family by their side.

These front-line workers spend 12 or more hours tending to patients, fielding calls from anxious loved ones wanting updates and holding a hand as a heart stops beating. Then they go home, often still thinking about their patients or mentally preparing to see their families, stripping out of scrubs in the garage and heading straight to the shower, trying to hide from any small children who might run in for a hug or kiss too soon.

"Going into work you never know what you're going to get into, especially in health care. But with COVID it's that times 10," said Tyler Phelps, a respiratory therapist at Bakers-

field Memorial. "There's so much pressure and you never know if you'll have enough staff."

Respiratory therapists play a critical role in treating COVID-19 patients because the illness targets the lungs and so many struggle to adequately breathe.

"It's like a constant brain attack," Phelps said of patients who are short of breath and unable to get enough oxygen.

It's not like you just exercised and feel out of breath. It's not even like having pneumonia, he says.

"It's a whole different ballgame," said Phelps, a 36-year-old father of four. "You see the patient afraid to move. Just trying to adjust their position on a bed winds them."

Respiratory therapists, among other duties, set up patients on ventilators, a key piece of equipment in treating the most critical COVID-19 patients. That also means shutting down the ventilator when a patient has no hope of recovery. With visitors restricted and no family at the pa-

tient's side, Phelps and his colleagues have also taken on the role of providing support and comfort in those final moments.

One of his first COVID-19 patients who died was a 95-year-old man who developed organ failure.

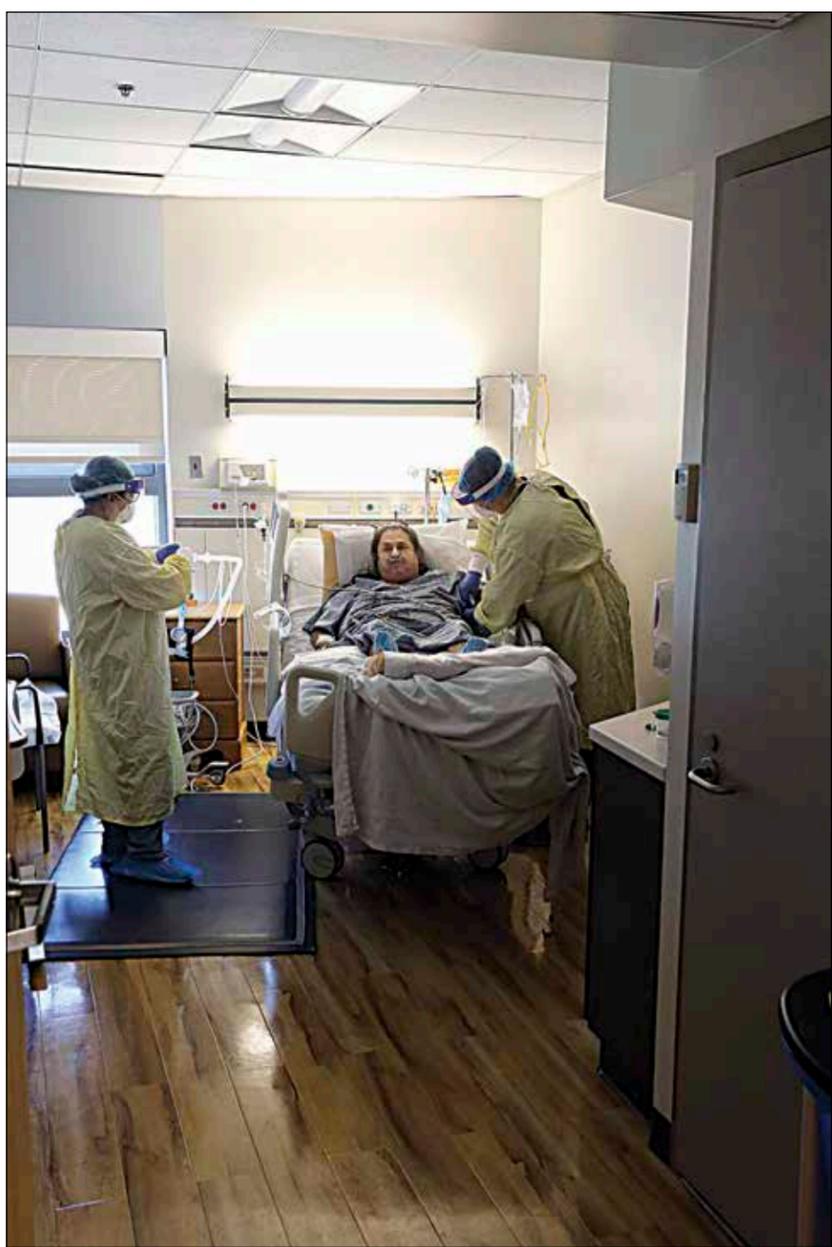
"I thought, this patient has been living on this planet for 95 years and this is the end, in this room, without their loved ones holding their hand, saying goodbye. It was me and our nurse," Phelps said. "This is what we're dealing with. People are dying alone."

Phelps, whose wife is an ICU nurse at another local hospital, also has the added worry of being as careful as possible not to contract the virus and spread it to his family. He described a constant fear that comes on at the end of his shift, as he heads home to his kids — ages 2, 4, 6 and 8.

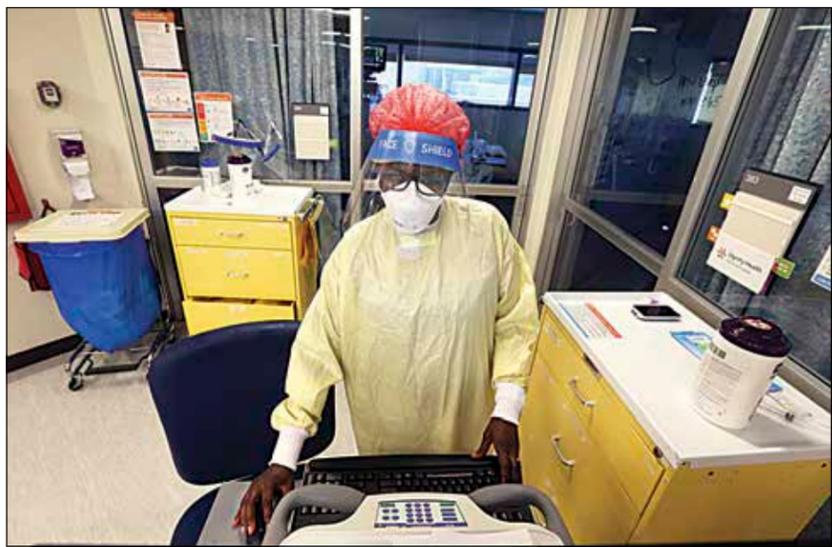
"It's that drive home, wondering if you were as safe as possible. Did I accidentally breathe something I shouldn't have?" he said. "It's a gut-wrenching feeling."

Many of the medical workers said this was the most challenging time of their careers.

Dr. Amy Mehta, a pulmonologist who is part of a three-doctor team treating the hospital's COVID-19 patients, described long days and an increased patient load. In addition to that, she and her colleagues are treating a disease about which little is known. There are no known cures for the



Nursing assistant Melvis Alfaro and nurse Angela Bilyeu tend to patient Pedro Cortez in a COVID-19 unit on Friday at Memorial Hospital. The hospital has about 60 COVID-19 patients and four separate units, including two ICUs, to care for them.



Nurse Stella Kerish works in one of two COVID-19 ICUs at Memorial Hospital on Friday.

coronavirus and the few therapies available are in short supply.

"We were doing OK but in the past three or four weeks we have gotten a lot more patients and I think that's coincided with opening everything up," said Mehta, a Fresno native. On Friday, she was heading into her first weekend off in weeks.

"I have little kids so being at home is my way of decompressing. They're

so innocent and playful. That's my way of forgetting about everything," she said.

Anna Leviyeva, a 34-year-old ICU nurse at Bakersfield Memorial, said working in the ICU is known to be hard "but this is different because it's so drawn out, because it's weeks and weeks and we get so invested in it."

The native of New York City and daughter of two Russian immigrants who

were both doctors has been a nurse for close to five years.

She recalled one of her earliest COVID-19 patients, an otherwise healthy Hispanic man in his late 50s or early 60s. He had difficulty breathing and ended up in the ICU, Leviyeva said, but he wasn't as bad off as some other patients. He could get up, use the bathroom on his own

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LOCAL

'This is what the virus is'

Two local hospital workers apply experience in New York to helping COVID-19 patients here

BY STACEY SHEPARD
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In late April, when the coronavirus was just getting a foothold in Kern County and local hospitals were empty, two respiratory therapists who work for Adventist Health Bakersfield headed to New York City.

Marisela Gonzales, 25, and Natalie Palomar, 27, arrived at the midpoint of New York's hospital surge and spent seven weeks working in "the eye of the storm," as Gonzales called it, at Jacobi Medical Center, a 450-bed hospital in the Bronx. They came back to Bakersfield in mid-June, just as Kern County's case counts and hospitalizations grew. In the past week, local hospitals reached a tipping point as they filled to capacity and are now seeking hundreds more health care workers to open up more beds.

"It's kind of getting the same as New York," Palomar said Thursday, as she worked her eighth straight day picking up an extra shift at Bakersfield Memorial.

Patients in every room. Patients on high-oxygen intake because their blood oxygen saturations are so low.

"This is what the virus is," said the Mira Monte High School graduate.

Palomar worked Tuesday through Thursday at Adventist Health, which she said was busier than Bakersfield Memorial.

"I put three to four people on ventilators each day. People died every day. You turn around the ventilator, clean it, and put it on another patient. People crash all

day," she said.

Gonzales said she also sees signs that the situation locally is starting to feel similar to her time in New York. She arrived at work last week and noticed people sitting on lawn chairs outside the hospital's ER, waiting to get in.

In New York, Palomar and Gonzales sometimes had up to 18 patients on ventilators at one time and logged 9 miles of walking per shift.

"There were people dying left and right. There were people dead on gurneys in the hallways. It was like being in a movie," Palomar said.

While Palomar has six years of experience as a respiratory therapist, Gonzales was just months into her career after graduating from San Joaquin Valley College in August.

"It's eye-opening. It's an amazing experience and I love my job," Gonzales said of her time in New York. "But it's emotional and it's mental."

The pair, both graduates of San Joaquin Valley College, had each other to turn to for support in New York. They walked to and from the hospital together, ate meals together, and shared their experiences and breakdowns.

But when they came back to Bakersfield, it was different, Palomar said, choking up as she spoke. That's when she began to process what she experienced.

She recalled the hospital in New York at one point had one ventilator left and was so overrun with patients the staff couldn't get to all of them.

"There were times when it was



PHOTOS COURTESY OF NATALIE PALOMAR

Marisela Gonzales, left, and Natalie Palomar, right, both respiratory therapists at Adventist Health Bakersfield, spent seven weeks working at Jacobi Medical Center in New York City in May and June. They are now helping local COVID-19 patients as cases and hospitalizations surge in Kern County.

like, 'Which one are we going to save?'" she said.

But Palomar is thankful for the experience and knowledge she gained there.

"When things pop off and five things are happening at once, I try to stay calm and constantly remind everyone, it's OK. We're doing the best we can," said Palomar. "If a patient doesn't make it for whatever reason, we literally are doing all that we can."

Palomar was scheduled to be off Friday and then back to work Saturday.



Palomar, left, and Gonzales.



ALEX HORVATH / THE CALIFORNIAN

Dr. David Aguirre works in the Bakersfield Memorial Hospital COVID-19 unit on Friday, a 30-bed unit for less critical patients. Every room in the unit was full.



ALEX HORVATH / THE CALIFORNIAN

Dr. Amy Mehta in one of two COVID-19 ICUs at Bakersfield Memorial Hospital on Friday. Mehta is one of three physicians at the hospital caring for some 60 COVID-19 patients at the facility.



Dustin Neefus, nurse manager of the ICUs at Bakersfield Memorial Hospital, where 14 of the 16 available ICU beds for COVID-19 patients were full on Friday.

HOSPITAL

Continued from PAGE A2

and feed himself, she said.

But Leviyeva returned to the unit one day and the man was on a ventilator. After two weeks, his feet turned black and necrotic, a sign, she said, that a COVID

patient is reaching the end-point. And in his third week there, he died. ICU nurses care for

patients in their most critical point of illness, but watching someone slowly progress through it that way struck her, she said.

One of the hardest parts of the job for Leviyeva has been calling families to deliver the news that a loved one has died.

Normally family is there in the room. There is no need to describe in words how the patient passed. Or that a nurse was holding his hand so he wasn't alone.

"It's very difficult to call the family. You don't have words for it," said Leviyeva. "It kind of feels like you're not doing enough."

But she has taken heart in the camaraderie and cohesion she feels with her colleagues, who turn to each other for support both in their work and processing the emotional side effects of it.



Memorial Hospital nurse Angela Bilyeu flushes the IV of patient Pedro Cortez in a COVID-19 unit on Friday. Medical facilities in Kern County are being pushed to the limit as more and more people contract COVID-19.

"It's not a one-man sport, nursing, at all. Ever," Leviyeva said. "We're a lot closer. I feel like we're in a war, like a little squadron. We're working so well together and have each other's backs."

On the fourth floor of Bakersfield Memorial on Friday, Pedro Cortez was lying in a hospital bed in a blue and white gown with an oxygen cannula at his nose.

He was in one of two 30-

bed units for less critical COVID-19 patients.

He held up a casted left arm, explaining in short bursts that he had broken his wrist. When he came to the hospital, he was tested for the virus. It was positive. He'd said he hadn't felt well, and then his symptoms got worse and he was struggling to breathe. On Friday, he was feeling better and expressed his appreciation for the care he was receiving as nurse Angela Bilyeu flushed his IV and checked his oxygen levels.

Bilyeu later explained she frequently checks on

Cortez's oxygen level because even with less critical COVID-19 patients, just talking can cause oxygen saturation levels to go down.

"We were told we peaked out in early April," said Terri Churchill, vice president and chief nursing officer for Memorial Hospital and Dignity Health Central California Division. "Our next peak wasn't supposed to be until winter."

But then patients began to stream into the hospital. Many said the uptick began after the stay-at-home orders were lifted and the county began reopening in early June.

On June 1, there were 63 patients hospitalized for COVID-19 in Kern County. That number has now quadrupled, reaching a high of 280 early last week. Public health officials announced Thursday that all 10 Kern County hospitals had reached capacity and were starting to roll out surge plans to increase beds. That would also require finding hundreds more health care workers to staff those additional beds.

Memorial Hospital is licensed for 420 beds but typically operates at about 280 staffed beds. Under surge plans, the hospital will start to add 60 more, half of which will be ICU beds, said Michelle Willow, director of external communication.

COVID-19 is an intensive sickness and requires more staff to treat each patient, so even a well-staffed unit gets spread thin quickly, said Dustin Neefus, nurse manager of the ICUs at the hospital.

Some on ventilators require "proning," Neefus explained, where the patient is placed face-down for up to 18 hours in order to get better oxygenation. That process of flipping the patient who is attached to monitors and a ventilator typically requires up to seven staffers to accomplish, Neefus said.

On top of that, nurses who are older, immunocompromised or pregnant can't work in COVID-19 units, further limiting staffing.

"It was scary at first but I think everyone has risen to the occasion," said Neefus of his nursing staff.

Many of the health care workers interviewed said it's a huge misconception that only the elderly or those with preexisting conditions get deathly ill from COVID-19. It affects people of all ages — in their 20s and 30s and 80s and 90s, they said.

Nearly everyone expressed frustration at the difficult work they do in the hospital and the distance they've kept from their own families only to be driving in their car or scrolling social media and see people who don't take the virus seriously, or refuse to wear a mask, or continue to gather with others.

They wished those people could take a tour through the hospital and see patients hooked to machines, hear their wheezing and labored breathing, or see the fear in their eyes when told they have to go on a ventilator.

"I'm hoping the public will know it's not a hoax, it's real," Churchill said. "Wearing your mask is very important."