



Ken Matuszek—Community Care Alliance Frontline Worker

“One time, I found someone during a routine home medication outreach who was passed out on the floor. He had septic shock from an infection and was delirious. He wanted me to just leave his medications and go. In my better instinct, I gave him a once-over and called 911. He refused to leave with rescue unless someone met him while he was in the hospital and ensured his cat was cared for. I wound up being that guy. The move saved his life and he is still grateful for what happened that day.” — Ken Matuszek, BS, RN, CARN

During COVID-times the role of nurse conjures images of bedside care in most extreme cases. But what does a psychiatric nurse do? “Like all other nurses at CCA; we keep bad things from happening to good people.” That is Ken Matuszek, RN, describing his job in a nutshell. But, it is so much more complex than that. Ken is a psychiatric nurse at the behavioral health frontlines, which could be a client’s home, in the lobby at Community Care Alliance (CCA), or even in Ken’s car where he transports clients to COVID test sites.

What does Ken love about his job? He says the thank yous. “I get them a lot. Sometimes for something minor like giving out hand sanitizer or masks or giving simple health education. Sometimes they are for something big like taking a symptomatic patient who is having a panic attack to a COVID-19 test. Even the mundane stuff, like the thanks I get from the local unlicensed pharmaceutical representatives who I teach Narcan administration. The ‘thank you’ messages I have gotten since the pandemic have been the sincerest and most genuine I have ever gotten in my life. Some people even cry. Moments like that make it all worthwhile.”

“Another instance that stands out. I had a client waiting to be seen by her prescriber for an appointment and was struggling with putting on a mask in the lobby. This person had profound intellectual disability and was getting very upset. I helped her tie on the mask and taught her how to do it herself. This small action meant a lot for this woman and was one of the moments that I am proudest of in being a nurse. It is the small things in life—not necessarily the large gung-ho lifesaving moments that often matter most.”

Ken, who is a native Rhode Islander, views it as a privilege to serve the community that he calls home. “It is a privilege to serve here on the home front as a nurse during the pandemic. This is the best time and the worst time in history to be a nurse. The work is stressful and we do put our health and safety on the line. We have no choice. Nurses pay a steep price to be what we are. I find that people here in northern Rhode Island need nurses the most at this time in history; and the community health nurse has become the frontline medic on the COVID-19 battlefield.”

Susan Corkran, BS. RN, CCA's Director of Nurses, describes his determination. "Ken manifests the characteristics that many nurses possess but don't recognize in themselves: dedication, enthusiasm, compassion, intelligence, creativity. In the current pandemic crisis, Ken did not hesitate to nominate himself to transport his team's suspected COVID+ clients for testing!"

During the pandemic, Ken has been working 3 jobs, he says because there is a shortage of skilled healthcare workers with the pandemic and an increased need for us. Like other nurses at Community Care Alliance, Ken makes sure that our patients are getting their medications and in-person care that keeps them safe and stable psychiatrically and medically. Right now, his first priority is to screen staff and clients and reduce the risks from COVID-19. Nurses provide a great deal of basic education and prevention, promoting harm reduction and safety among patients with substance use disorders, especially with the spike of substance use we have seen since the start of the pandemic. Nurses also do a great deal of coordination with our prescribers, external agencies, and pharmacies to keep the flow of healthcare services as close to normal as possible during these times.

His other jobs are working as an opioid treatment nurse in South Providence; and teaching/consulting for the Substance Use Mental Health Leadership Council of RI, a collaborative advocacy and training organization of community mental health and substance use treatment member agencies.

"Since this pandemic I have not been able to see my friends and family as much because of the risk of spreading COVID 19. Nurses have been mobilized now more so than ever. This is the nature of the beast as a frontline healthcare worker in these times. We pay a steep price to be what we are. I am willing to pay that price because, in my opinion, it is the right thing to do."

Susan Corkran nominated Ken for this Frontline Worker Spotlight. "Ken's ebullient and determined interactions with clients lead to improved engagement and insight. He is especially effective with people diagnosed with substance use disorders; he does not take no for an answer when it comes to education, monitoring, support and hope. In his joint role as Assertive Community Treatment Team RN and RN educator, Ken is always available to colleagues for technical and clinical support, to universal positive reviews."

Ken says everything and nothing has changed with the pandemic. Nurses have put themselves on the frontline at the highest of risk during this pandemic—all to keep our patients and colleagues safe. They have to wear masks and gown and glove up. Despite our best efforts with PPE and safety precautions, there is real risk to nurses—during at the door COVID 19 screenings and while doing routine care such as vitals, in person outreaches, or injections they are in close proximity to clients. As Ken says, "Despite everything, the job has not-changed and our collective mission has not changed COVID or no COVID. The job is to keep bad things from happening to our patients. Nurses can and will get us through this."

At Community Care Alliance, we are grateful to all 52 of the frontline nurses that work for us!