

The Blizzard of '22:

A CKHA Christmas Story to Remember

Written by Fannie Vavoulis, Director of Communications, CKHA

I had the privilege of being Admin On Call (AOC) the week the big blizzard hit Chatham-Kent on December 23 and 24, 2022. While the news outlets were predicting a “big storm”, there is always this part of me that wonders if the meteorologist is going to be right. In preparation for the storm, leadership discussed internal accommodations and connected with local hotels to have them on standby. Communication was sent to management that accommodations would be available and to connect with staff. And then, Friday, December 23 arrived. I started the day thinking it looked a little “wintery” outside and as I worked away at my desk, reminding myself that I still needed to get Christmas groceries, the weather started turning. Then my phone started ringing. And my email inbox started flowing. The storm had arrived – and I had no idea what was about to happen.

We’ve heard the stories about Wal-Mart and stranded customers sleeping over. We’ve heard about the multiple shelters and homes across the municipality opening up to take in stranded travelers. We’ve heard so many wonderful things about our community. Now it is our chance to share the story of CKHA. Many of you may have likely heard some of the stories and there are probably some I have not heard yet myself. Here are the CKHA Blizzard of ’22 stories, from my experience as AOC, that emerged over 24 hours of what I think we can all say was the most unforgettable Christmas at CKHA.

We provided accommodations to so many staff that I lost count throughout the day of requests. There was no hotel in Chatham/Wallaceburg that didn’t have a CKHA staff person stay in it on the Friday night. A huge thank you goes to Holiday Inn, Retro Suites and the Wallaceburg Hotel that answered our call and stepped up and gave us every hotel room available. That is...until their lobbies filled with stranded motorists from the 401 accidents and road closures. They helped accommodate us even though they had scared, lost and upset travelers in their lobby. One hotel employee told me they had stranded motorists sleeping in their lobby over night with babies crying and they had never experienced anything like this. I am forever grateful to the hotels for keeping our staff safe.

We had patients come to the Chatham Emergency Room who were in the 401 accident. Upon discharge, they had nowhere to go. They had no cars to get them to a shelter. They had no family nearby to pick them up. With the quick thinking of ER staff and After Hours Supervisor, Tara Johnston, the RAZ in the ER was turned into sleeping quarters for these patients and our housekeeping staff provided snacks and drinks to keep them comfortable until they could find a way home.

Highway 40 to Wallaceburg closed very early on - and we have all seen the video and photos of the snow drifts and abandoned cars. Staff in Wallaceburg stayed to provide coverage. On Saturday, roads were still closed and we needed staff from Chatham to go to the Wallaceburg Site to relieve others. With the road closure, we called our friends at Chatham-Kent Fire Department to provide transportation so our staff could continue to provide care to our patients and community. They answered our call and drove staff to the hospital.

On Christmas Eve, Fairfield Park provided daytime meals to our patients in Wallaceburg since the food courier could not travel the closed highway and Black Goose restaurant provided dinner. Our community came together to ensure our patients remained fed comfortable.

And speaking of food, with everything being closed on Christmas Eve and staff staying unexpectedly at hotels/friends' homes, we needed to ensure there was food available on site. In Chatham, Subway baked as many foot longs as possible to ensure our staff would be fed during the day - this was free for our staff to eat. In Wallaceburg, I called Greg Hetherington from CKXS who acted as our pizza delivery person and brought lots of pizzas to the site for staff to enjoy.

I know many of you took in stranded families and worked longer than usual shifts to help with staff who couldn't make it in because of the roads. I spoke to several of you on the phone and via text who were grateful for the accommodations and fearful to drive home. I know there are more stories, which I'm not aware of, and I hope to hear them someday.

There is a long list of people who stepped in to ensure the hospital continued to be a safe place for our patients, families and staff. I would like to list everyone but there is not enough space. Moreover, I fear I would miss someone. To each person that was working those few days, to each person that decided they couldn't drive the roads and opted to stay home and safe, to each person who helped a colleague, answered my panicked text or call, to each person that stayed late, came in early and helped each other stay calm - THANK YOU.

I have had the opportunity to be part of many proud moments in Chatham-Kent and at CKHA but this, THIS is by far is the most proud I have ever been to be part of a team that came together, supported their colleagues, and provided the most exceptional care all in what was one of the most frightening times our community has ever seen.

Congratulations to all of you - and thank you. It is an Admin on Call week I will never, ever forget.

Fannie

