Executive Q&A: Michelle Gonzalez, CEO, North County Health Services

By STEVE ADAMER

I’ve had the pleasure of being with NCHS for close to 2 decades and have had the opportunity to work in a variety of capacities throughout the organization and doing so does allow me to apply a unique level of understanding both for staff and patients. I have enough insights to understand the complexities of our operations, yet, I also have a very strong working knowledge of how each business domain is interrelated and interdependent. This motivates me to listen to those on the front line, the patients, and other health care professionals — I’ve learned that they really are the heartbeat of the organization.

Has NCHS faced challenges in the COVID-19 crisis?

NCHS has experienced significant challenges, similar to other health care systems, in trying to care for our patients on the front line. The shortage of testing, PPE, and reduction in patient visits has forced us to consolidate our services, furlough members of our workforce and to quickly ramp up our “virtual visit” capabilities in order to see patients either via phone or through video.

While we’ve certainly had a significant amount of challenges, I’ve also been profoundly moved by the spirit of our staff and their willingness to rise to the occasion. The creativity and dedication of our workforce is unlike any other. They are the best of the best and serve without limitations and truly uphold the spirit of our mission. They have done this for nearly 50 years, in particular providing high quality and compassionate health care to the undererved and our diverse communities.

With unemployment rates skyrocketing, do you expect NCHS will need new strategies to deal with a possible influx of patients?

We definitely anticipate that there will be “pent up need” for patients who were not able to access care during the height of the pandemic and we also anticipate that as a result of lost jobs and wages many patients and community members in general will have had an interruption in their health care benefits.

NCHS is ready to respond. Our board of directors, our staff, physicians and all of our health care providers have been working around the clock to provide virtual visits and to ensure that to the extent possible, our patients have had no interruption in their care. This has allowed us to secure increased access so that we can see patients timely.

And NCHS is enrolling new patients. With so many seeking health care, we have enrollment specialists helping individuals sign up for insurance such as Medi-Cal and work with the individuals on a sliding scale based on income. More importantly, we can sign people up for Cal-Fresh, WIC and we can direct them to food banks and other community resources so that they will be healthy. Not only are we concerned about a patient’s physical health, we’re concerned about their mental health. This pandemic can be such a stressful time as people are facing the unknown. We have behavioral health specialists who are standing by to help people through difficult time.

Finally, we are very proud that later this year, in September we will be going live with OCHIN-EPIC, a new electronic health record (EHR) system. The capabilities of this new EHR are so in sync with who we are as an organization. We are the only community health center in San Diego County to have made this level of investment in purchasing a new EHR. It is a testament to our commitment to provide our patients and staff with cutting-edge and innovative solutions.

Health care is often considered difficult and complex, at NCHS, we are doing everything we can to make it as easy as possible.

The future of NCHS is so incredibly bright, we have much to look forward to and we are excited to announce future developments.

When you served as Chief Strategy & Development Officer, were you part of NCHS’ expansion plans, future developments.

As Home For Teens

A run-down Escondido apartment complex is being transformed into a home for teens and young adults who had been living on the streets.

The YMCA of San Diego County’s Youth & Family Services is in the process of renovating the two-building complex at 711 West Lincoln Ave.

“The idea here is to make this a place that allows the youth, the teenagers to really feel like this is not some hole in the wall but this is a nice place to call home,” said Jonathan Hall, YMCA vice president and CFO.

“I can’t stress enough the importance that the team has put in making these units not just safe and clean, but really making them aesthetically pleasing,” Hall said.

The $9.5 million project will provide a home for 44 low-income youth between the ages of 16 and 26. The complex has 25 apartments of about 430 square feet. Each apartment will be shared by two people, and the YMCA will provide social services on site.

Dream Come True

“This is really a dream come true,” said Krysta Esquivel, YMCA executive director for youth and family services.

“We’re really excited to be able to renovate the entire complex to create dignified spaces for these young people.”

The YMCA bought the property in July 2019 for $8.5 million, according to CoStar, a real estate research firm.

Built in 1979, the apartments in the 23,475-square-foot complex were in serious need of repair when the YMCA acquired it.

The vast majority of the units were really a bad condition. ‘We’re talking holes in the wall,” said Courtney Pendleton, YMCA associate director of public relations and communications.

“It’s not what we would put our young people in. They weren’t dignified, that’s for sure,” Esquivel said.

Interior Demolition Started

Demolition of the interior of the apartments has just started.

“They’re actually being fully gutted down to the studs,” Esquivel said.

And the renovation’s finished, Esquivel said the apartments “won’t be high end but they’ll look high end.”

“We’re pretty good at making spaces look beautiful,” Esquivel said.

The HVAC systems are being upgraded and solar electric arrays are being added.

“We’ll have wood floors and ceramic tile throughout,” YMCA page 21