Sisters' legacy lives on through care of Fort McMurray evacuees

The Sisters of Charity (Grey Nuns) of Montreal's mission to be vibrant and compassionate signs of hope in the world was seen first-hand by the city of Edmonton when they founded the Edmonton General Hospital in 1896. In this burgeoning community, they provided excellent care for those in need.

When the acute care services of the Edmonton General were transferred to the newly built Grey Nuns Community Hospital in 1988, staff walked from the Edmonton General to the Grey Nuns Hospital carrying a torch. This was symbolic of how they would carry forward the Sister's legacy of compassionate care at the new facility.

The Sisters were instrumental in including palliative care, mental health programs, and care for pregnant mothers and babies as main focuses for the Grey Nuns Community Hospital.

Today, their legacy continues in the hospital. This was evident when wildfires raged through Fort McMurray in May 2016. Thousands of people were displaced from their homes and evacuated to Edmonton, including those in hospital.

From the beginning of May until the end of June, 79 mothers from Fort McMurray delivered their babies at the Grey Nuns. Most of the women evacuated to Edmonton and admitted to the Labour and Delivery, Postpartum and Neonatal Intensive Care units arrived with nothing but the clothing on their backs.

"All of the staff at the Grey Nuns pulled together to help those in their time of need, living forward the Sister's legacy of compassionate care."

– Lana Chivers

One woman had delivered twins through caesarean section just two hours before being transported to the Grey Nuns. Another family was split up from their two-year-old when they were at the hospital delivering their baby, and neighbours were babysitting. Due to the evacuation constraints, it was days before they were reunited.

"Staff were beside themselves thinking of what they could do for these people who had lost everything," says Gail Cameron, Director, Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health Programs. "All of the teams pulled together and provided the comfort and items these families would need."

Staff purchased car seats, diapers, and various baby items, and the Child Health Services department provided clothing for the babies.

All of the departments at the Grey Nuns worked together to ensure each patient received exemplary treatment with compassion, kindness and warmth. From May 24, until June 2, 225 residents from Fort McMurray were cared for by the hospital, including a busload of people that had travelled for over 24 hours before they arrived at the emergency room.

"The team welcomed them with open arms, providing the extra care and comfort they needed after being in such a distressing situation," says Lana Chivers, Senior Director, Operations, Emergency, Cardiac Services, Critical Care, Medicine and Respiratory.

The care for these people didn't end at the hospital doors—some staff members from the Grey Nuns even travelled to Fort McMurray to help provide mental health services when those evacuated returned home.

"All of the staff at the Grey Nuns pulled together to help those in their time of need, living forward the Sister's legacy of compassionate care," says Lana.

Sisters of Charity (Grey Nuns) of Montreal