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Sheet metal worker helps build emergency room triage tents

Long Island City, NY – When John Weickert III received a call on March 27, 2020 that he was needed to assist in the build of an emergency department triage tent at NYU Winthrop Hospital in New York City to help treat potential COVID-19 cases, he jumped into action.

“Receiving a call like that in the middle of pandemic, well, you don’t even think twice about it,” he said. “I got the call at about 2 p.m. on the Friday, and we came up with a plan that day. On Saturday morning we opened up the shop to fabricate the ductwork for the tent, loaded it onto the truck in the afternoon and installed it.”

It was essential to have air conditioning and heating in place and ready to go before the facility could open to the public.

Weickert is fifth generation of the family-owned Weickert Industries, a signatory contractor with the International Association of Sheet Metal Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART).

Weickert is one example of how Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors' National Association (SMACNA) contractors and SMART craftspersons across the country are stepping up to assist—releasing some of the pressure on hospitals as they scramble to create more space to house COVID-19 patients.

New York, which as of mid-April was reported to have the most COVID-19 cases in the world with nearly 220,000 infected, has been setting up triage tents outside emergency rooms to screen patients for respiratory symptoms before they enter the building.

NYU Winthrop Hospital was originally operating at 511 beds but has been able to increase this number with triage tents, following the request from Governor Andrew Cuomo’s for hospitals to increase their capacity by 50 per cent.

Anne Kazel-Wilcox, manager, public relations at NYU Winthrop Hospital, said the hospital now has two emergency department triage tents. “They were erected in a matter of days,” Kazel-Wilcox said. “Each tent is used to help assess and manage those presenting with respiratory symptoms, accommodating overflow to our emergency department.”

In total, the two tents can accommodate around 40 patients.

Weickert was also involved in the second triage tent, but on a consultancy basis. “The market had gone quiet so we were down to a skeleton crew when the same contractor needed ductwork to be erected on a second tent,” he said. “I went down to do the balancing to verify the air ducts would have the proper air delivery for the comfort of staff and patients.”

Dr. Joseph Greco, senior vice president and chief of hospital operations at NYU Winthrop, said that while many patients have already been cleared, should the situation change, the triage tents are part of a backup plan to ensure the hospital is fully prepared moving forward.

For Weickert, being a part of something that will hopefully ease the strain placed on healthcare professionals makes him proud, but also has a deeper meaning for him. “It is personal to me as my my godmother is a nurse at NYU Winthrop Hospital and works in the intensive care unit,” he said. “Also, my two children were born in the hospital.”

“I am extremely proud of the fact that Local 28 sheet metal workers and our contractors have stepped up to utilize their craftsmanship and expertise when called upon,” said Eric Meslin, president and business manager at SMART Local 28 of Metropolitan New York and Long Island. “There is no better choice than a union workforce when quality, speed and safety is a necessity. There is a great sense of pride knowing that we are doing our part during these chaotic and uncertain times.”

The International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) and the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors’ National Association (SMACNA) have a labor-management partnership that is more than 75 years old. The goal of these *Partners in Progress* is to maintain an effective cooperative effort that demonstrates their expertise in the heating ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC), architectural metal, and industrial sheet metal markets. For additional information, visit pinp.org