

'We're all in this together'

4/21/20

Madison doctor helps set up state's first COVID-positive respite facility for homeless

By Lisa Reisman

Where do you go if you're being told to stay at home and you have no home? How about if you start feeling symptoms of COVID-19?

"If one has a home and gets sick, but doesn't need to be hospitalized, the vast majority of people can just

stay home and self-quarantine for 14 days," said Madison resident David Rosenthal, M.D., an assistant professor of General Internal Medicine at Yale and the medical director of H-PACT (Homeless Patient Aligned Care Team) in the VA Connecticut Healthcare System.

"If you don't have a

house to go to, you can't stay home, and if you're in a congregate setting, like a shelter, you may infect hundreds of people, and if you're staying on the street, you'll potentially infect even more."

That was the motivation for a 50-bed respite shelter recently set up by City
See Facility on A4



Contributed photo

Respite facility for COVID-19 positive people experiencing homelessness at Career High School in New Haven.

FACILITY

From page A1

of New Haven staff, as well as Dr. Mehul Dalal, community services administrator for the City of New Haven, and Emergency Operations Director Rick Fontana, with supporting medical expertise by Rosenthal.

The site, which was the subject of controversy in late March over concerns

that it would endanger both residents in the immediate area and students on their return, is the gymnasium of New Haven's Hill Regional Career High School, a designated emergency shelter location.

"If anything, this improves the ability of the city to reduce transmission of COVID-19 by allowing people to isolate who otherwise would be forced to sleep on the

street or in public areas," New Haven Mayor Justin Elicker said.

"Additionally the New Haven public schools have gone to great lengths to ensure the school will be cleaned afterwards using CDC-approved practices."

It's the first such respite shelter in the state.

"This is a facility for people who are experiencing homelessness, who are COVID positive, and who need a place to recover and to voluntarily self-quarantine," said Rosenthal, who's spent the past eight years working with veterans struggling with homelessness.

"We're not turning anyone away," Elicker said. "This is an important effort both to support the individuals experiencing homelessness but also to keep the health of the greater community safe by ensuring that more people have the ability to isolate if they test positive."

Plans for the facility, whose operations are supported by the City of New Haven emergency operations fund and which is staffed primarily by volunteers from the Medical Reserve Corps, came together quickly.

In mid-March, an email from Dalal circulated among Rosenthal and his colleagues.

The email "presented the urgent problem of how to create a place for people experiencing homelessness who aren't, or are no longer, sick enough to be

in the hospital but have nowhere to safely quarantine," he said.

Within a week, there was a team of doctors and nurses from Yale's National Clinician Scholars Program, which focuses on improving health care in the community; as well as colleagues involved in work on homelessness, including Alison Cunningham, former head of Columbus House.

Together, they drafted a 100-page document outlining guidelines, protocols and logistics, on "how we can take care of these people with only a few space options," Rosenthal said.

"What we essentially had to do was build a field hospital, not really a hospital, just a facility, on the fly," he said. "We like to say we're flying the plane as we build it because none of us has ever dealt with anything like this."

The initiative is important on both an individual and a public health level, according to Rosenthal.

"On an individual level, we are providing dignity and respite care to people who are sick, who are incredibly vulnerable and marginalized and stigmatized," he said.

"On the public health, or societal, level, we have an obligation to help quarantine people who are sick and infectious, and who may be moving around and putting everybody at risk," he said.

"This is one of those prime examples of how

we're all in this together."

The good news, Rosenthal added, "is that the hospitals still have capacity, so it's not as urgent, but if this gets as bad as New York and hospitals get overwhelmed, this is another outlet where people who don't really need to be in the hospital have a place to go."

The process, Elicker said, is that "when [individuals] are healthy enough to be released from the hospital, they will be referred to and transported to the facility." Those not hospitalized need to be referred in order to ensure they are COVID-19 positive.

"I was very skeptical about coming here, but the food has been superb and the nurses and doctors who are volunteering, couldn't be nicer," said Doug Bisbing, who spent a week at Yale-New Haven after testing positive for COVID-19, adding that the staff provided him with egg crates to make his cot more comfortable for his bad back.

Rosenthal's hope is that the facility set up at Career High School will become a model.

"There's a plan for some of the Clinician Scholars to circulate what we're doing because we want other cities and jurisdictions to think about doing something similar and scale it," he said, adding that it also might be useful for nursing homes and rehab centers that are converting into COVID-

positive facilities.

For now, the aim is not just to work out the kinks, but to make the space safe, clean, and appealing.

"We had our first patient last week, and it was very clear that to make this a more comfortable space, we would need a lot more stuff," he said.

Regarding donations, "we are trying to meet everyone's basic needs and to make people comfortable, so imagine what you might need if you're in a high school gym with 49 other strangers on cots for up to 14 days," he said.

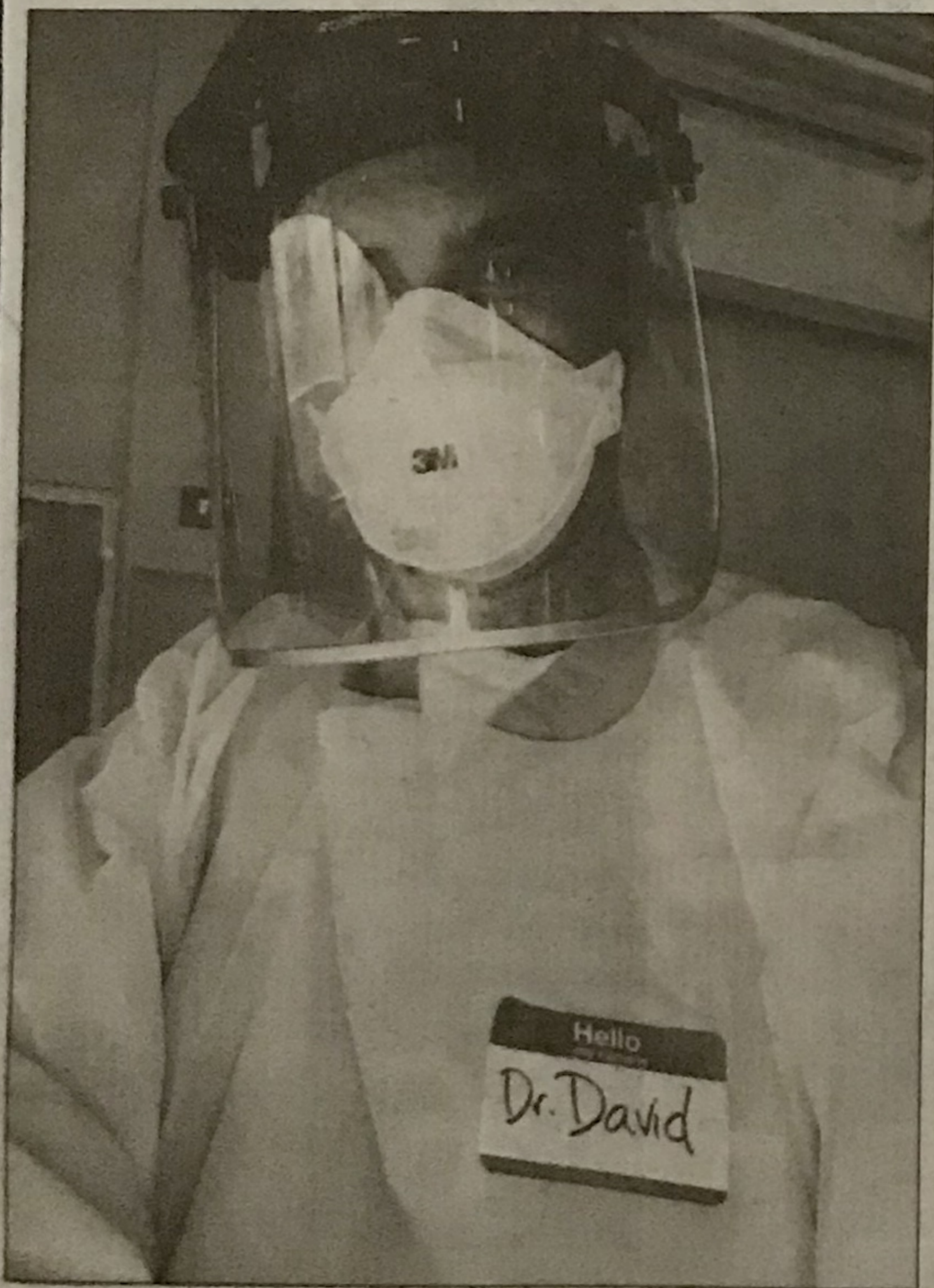
His post on Facebook last week yielded pillows, blankets, sweatpants, sweatshirts, masks, adult coloring books, and a chess set, as well as tablets with headphones, and Internet-enabled devices to watch TV or surf the web.

Others have dropped off prepaid cell phones and phone cards "to help people connect to the outside world," he said.

"Over the weekend people were literally Venmoing me donations," Rosenthal said. "There is such goodness in this world."

To make a monetary donation to the COVID-positive respite facility, visit www.columbushouse.org.

Drop offs, at the clean zone of the entrance at 140 Legion Ave. of Hill Regional High School in New Haven, are welcome. To arrange for a drop off, email jharriott@newhavenct.gov.



Contributed photo

Dr. David Rosenthal, M.D. of Madison, who's been supporting the creation of a respite facility for COVID-19 positive people experiencing homelessness.