

They Go Where They Are Needed

Medical student volunteers fight the pandemic from behind the scenes



Tara Ahmadi, M21, Sarah Rosenberg-Scott, M06, MG06 (MPH), and Leah Shaw, A16, MG17 (MPH), were part of the care effort at Boston Hope, the field hospital for COVID-19 patients set up at the Boston Convention Center. Photo: Alonso Nichols

By Julie Flaherty
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As a data manager at Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program, Leah Shaw, A16, MG17 (MPH), typically uses her background in epidemiology and biostatistics to support HIV and Hepatitis C initiatives. But when the pandemic hit Boston in early March, it was all hands on deck. At Boston Hope, the field hospital set up in part to shelter homeless people who had tested positive for COVID-19, Shaw donned layers of personal protective equipment (PPE) to work with patients, doing everything from making beds to serving meals.

Each time she entered the field hospital, the alumna was grateful for the Tufts University School of Medicine student volunteers who were watching over her, making sure no matter how bleary-eyed she might be, she was putting on her mask, gloves, gown, and other PPE the right way to stay safe.

“At 6:30 in the morning, or after a twelve-hour shift, just making sure that you are following infection control protocols correctly is really, really important,” Shaw said. “And they have just been so nice and confident and clear and knowledgeable, and patient with us when we are tired.”

Through school initiatives created by Amy Kuhlik, dean of student affairs, and grassroots student organizations, Tufts medical student volunteers have been helping with protective equipment; babysitting or grocery shopping for hospital staff; calling patients with test results; and doing whatever they can to support those on the front lines.

The work hasn't been glamorous, but they have been eager to do it.

“In public health, when a community looks at you and says, ‘This is what I need,’ that's what you do first,” said Sarah Rosenberg-Scott, Mo6, MGO6 (MPH), an assistant professor at the medical school who helped organize the Boston Hope volunteer opportunity for third-year students. “You don't come in with your own agenda.”

Starting April 27, Tufts students worked the doors at Boston Hope in eight-hour shifts that ran through the night. Coordinator Tara Ahmadi, M21, said she and the other students monitored doctors, National Guard members, security personnel, social workers—everyone who came in or out—as they donned and doffed their PPE. Even physicians appreciated the guidance. Ahmadi remembers one saying, “I'm just tired. Just tell me what I need to do.”

The students constantly updated the protocols as different PPE became available or, for example, they saw a way to keep cell phones from becoming contaminated. (Plastic zip bags were involved.) They juggled schedules to make sure all shifts were covered while they took board exams.

“I can't even begin to tell you how passionate our students became about this and how they ran with it,” said Rosenberg-Scott.



PA/MPH student Dominique Woodland, left, has been packing breakfasts and lunches for children who were missing out on the meals they would normally get at school. Photo: Courtesy Dominique Woodland

Rosenberg-Scott, who has been on the front lines evaluating patients for COVID-19 in the respiratory care clinic at Newton-Wellesley Hospital, saw another way that Tufts medical students could contribute: calling patients to let them know their COVID-19 test results.

“It is unbelievably helpful for patients to have someone to talk to rather than just view lab results or get a one-word email,” Rosenberg said. Several Tufts students signed on and are working with the Newton-Wellesley Hospital COVID lab response team: calling patients, walking them through next steps, and answering their questions.

So Close and Yet So Far

When the coronavirus first struck Massachusetts, it was frustrating to be so close to the medical profession and yet so far, said Katherine Cochran, MG19 (MBS), M23. She has long wanted to be a doctor and even completed her master's degree in biomedical sciences at Tufts last year. But as a first-year med student, Cochran thought, "We still don't know nearly enough to actually be useful in this pandemic."

Then she learned that a group called Medical Personnel Support (MPS) Boston, started by three Boston University medical school students, was organizing health sciences students who could do errands for health-care workers who were working overtime on COVID-19. It was particularly appealing to her because they were offering to help not just physicians, but nurses, therapists, case workers, and hospital environmental staff.

"When this opportunity came along, I was like, 'Oh, my gosh, I can't do anything, but I can support the people that can.'"

Cochran joined MPS, and soon offered to coordinate a Tufts team of MPS volunteers. She recruited her classmate, Francesca Yi, MG19 (MBS), M23, to take a leadership role, too.

Now 128 volunteers from Tufts have signed up, including students from the MD program, the Public Health and Professional Degree Programs, the School of Dental Medicine, and The Fletcher School.

"We walk dogs, we will do laundry," Cochran said. "We'll do pharmacy runs, grocery store runs."

But childcare is by far the most requested service, said Yi, who recently has been babysitting for the one-year-old son of Mikhail Romashko. A cardiology fellow at Tufts Medical Center, Romashko volunteered to cover the COVID-19 ICU as a supervisory fellow when the critical care and infectious disease staff were overwhelmed. At the same time, he and his wife were left without childcare for their little boy when their day-care closed.

"We initially didn't bring any visitors in the house, but it reached a point when we had no option," he said. Then he found MPS. Having a medical student care for his son has been a boon, he said, because Yi understands the implications of social distancing.

"She has been serious about limiting her contacts, which makes us very comfortable having her here," he said.

Another MPS volunteer, Laura Fletcher, M23, MG23 (MPH), has been helping care for two children, ages two and five, while their parents, both physicians, conduct telehealth appointments with patients.

Being in a home with two busy physicians has given the medical student an unexpected glimpse into her future, and what it might be like to balance career and family. "It definitely makes it a lot more grounded and real— like this is what my life is going to look like," Fletcher said.

Fletcher, who is studying for a master's in public health, is also volunteering with the [Academic Public Health Volunteer Corps](#), helping with health communications for the town of Bedford, Massachusetts.

Helping Wherever They Are

Tufts health sciences students who had to return to their home states when the shutdown began have also found ways to contribute. The National Student Response Network (NSRN), begun by students at Harvard Medical School, has recruited more than 5,000 displaced college students. Jasmine Gale, M21, the NSRN



Laura Fletcher, M23, MG23 (MPH), volunteers through Medical Personnel Support Boston. Photo: Courtesy Laura Fletcher

Massachusetts coordinator, estimated that about two hundred Tufts students from all over the country have signed up.

Gale has worked closely with Cochran and Yi, connecting student volunteers with the right opportunities wherever they may live right now. “We've been able to help each other and share volunteers that way, and make sure that we're getting the word out to every student,” Gale said. “Especially for Tufts students who are in a different state, they can still participate in the COVID response.”

Dominique Woodland, a first-year student in the Physician Assistant Program who is also pursuing a public health degree, went home to California for spring break and ended up having to stay put. Through NSRN, she began volunteering five mornings a week in her community, packing breakfasts and lunches for children who were missing out on the meals they would normally get at school. Recently, they've been giving out extra food to help children through the weekend. She kept count one day: “We gave away over 1,200 meals in those two hours.”

The students say that they are more passionate than ever about their chosen professions. That said, seeing the pandemic unfold has given them much to consider. For Yi, it has meant thinking about public policy's influence on medicine and how profoundly that affects people's lives. “Even if the medicine is really good right now, do we have the system to make sure that we can get the medicine or the vaccines to everybody who needs it?” she asked. “I don't think we do.”

School of Medicine faculty constantly discuss the question of how to keep students safe while allowing them to learn from the pandemic, said Rosenberg-Scott. The lessons they take away from volunteering may be not only about providing care but seeing how professionals weather the strains of this unprecedented time.

“The mental toll of that is huge,” she said. “And I do think we have to find the balance of protecting them from that, and supporting them, but also allowing them to experience it because that's what we all do every day as doctors, right? We balance our worry about our patients and ourselves and our families and the world.”

Julie Flaherty can be reached at Julie.flaherty@tufts.edu.

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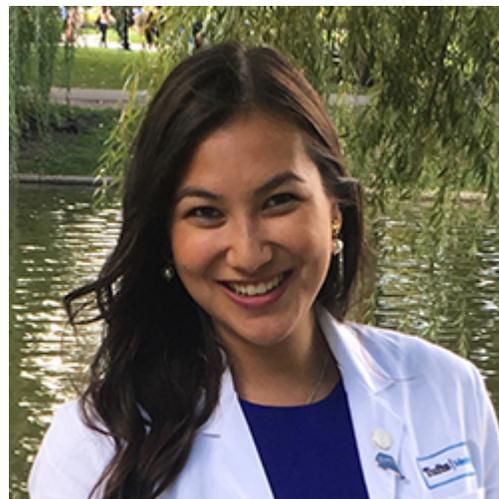
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Jasmine Gale, M21, is the Massachusetts coordinator for the National Student Response Network. Photo: Courtesy Jasmine Gale