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Memory-care unit for COVID-19 patients with dementia opens at Fairview Developmental Center



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Fairview Developmental Center, reactivated as an alternate care site during the latest coronavirus surge, now includes a 50-bed memory care unit for COVID-19 patients that will be operated by nonprofit Alzheimer's Orange County. (File Photo)

By SARA CARDINE | STAFF WRITER

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Fairview Developmental Center — a former state hospital reactivated as an alternate care site during the latest coronavirus surge — this week expanded to include a 50-bed memory-care unit for COVID-19 patients that will be operated by a local nonprofit.

A temporary wing in the Costa Mesa facility opened its doors Monday, and those in charge of the operation anticipate they may admit up to 25 patients in the week ahead as area care facilities and other agencies refer residents.

The space is to be operated by Irvine-based [Alzheimer's Orange County](#) under a \$1.5-million contract with the county designed to last for a one-year period, according to Jim McAleer, the organization's president and chief executive.

McAleer said the unit can potentially treat up to 50 COVID-19 patients, who suffer not only from the disease caused by the coronavirus but from dementia and other disorders that can make it difficult for them to be housed in traditional care facilities or hospital units.

“Hospitals are hard, hard places for them,” he said, describing how bright lights and noises tend to disorient memory-care patients. “When someone with dementia becomes COVID positive, that person could present a wander risk or refuse to wear a mask. If they don't have to be there, they shouldn't be.”

The nonprofit provides education and care consultations for those who care for people with dementia and also operates 12 residential board-and-care facilities throughout Orange County.

When local coronavirus cases began to surge and hospitals became overrun with COVID-19 cases, McAleer and his colleagues looked for a way to serve and treat this unique segment of the care population.

They reached out to the California Department of Social Services and were put in touch with Assemblywoman Cottie Petrie-Norris (D-Laguna Beach), who connected them with the Orange County Health Care Agency and the state's [Department of Developmental Services](#), which owns the 114-acre property.

In a matter of weeks, Alzheimer's Orange County was licensed to run the care facility and had furnished and staffed the unit to care for the first round of 25 patients.

“I've never seen collaboration like this — it's amazing how everyone has been showing up to help,” McAleer said.

Petrie-Norris said in a release issued Monday by Alzheimer's Orange County when she learned about the crisis occurring in dementia and memory-care facilities during the pandemic, she was

motivated to find a solution for the county's most vulnerable patients.

"This is a great example of how nonprofits, the county and state can work together to protect our community," she added.

The memory-care wing occupies just one portion of the massive complex retrofitted this spring to accommodate the treatment of ambulatory COVID-19 patients who may not require hospitalization but for varying reasons may be unable to return to their places of residence.

Initially, the state envisioned a facility that could house some 900 beds. But since the first patients [were admitted](#) in late April, census remained historically low. Fairview transitioned in late September to a "warm close" status, which left it largely unstaffed but able to be brought back online within 72 to 96 hours, officials reported.

Earlier this month, the state [reopened the facility](#) as a regional alternate care site as area coronavirus cases began to surge. A main area was designed to hold up to 125 patients, while the memory-care wing and another wing planned for the developmentally delayed can each be outfitted to treat 25 to 50 individuals.

Costa Mesa Fire & Rescue Chief Dan Stefano, who acts as a liaison representing the city in matters related to Fairview, confirmed Tuesday 16 patients were being treated in the main unit, including 10 from Los Angeles County.

McAleer said patients of the memory-care ward will be able to reside at Fairview until they've experienced 10 symptom-free days and have gone three days without a fever or fever-reducing medication. More serious cases of COVID-19 require a longer stay.

The idea is to free up hospital beds for more serious patients, while reducing the chance of coronavirus transmission among people who don't need to be in an intense medical setting.

"It's about the comfort and safety of a disenfranchised population who are not easy to serve in other places," McAleer said of the new unit.

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