

# First Responder

BY RENÉE GEARHART LEVY

Through forward-thinking and tenacity, emergency medicine doc Ron Elfenbein, MD '00, became Maryland's leader in Covid testing.

**E**very week, approximately 300 members of the U.S. military depart for overseas deployments via Baltimore Washington International (BWI) airport. And before they board their flights, they need to secure a negative test for Covid-19 within 48 hours of travel.

That task has become much easier since August, when FirstCall Medical Center opened a facility within BWI, one of only a handful of urgent care centers located in airports nationwide. FirstCall works directly with the USO Lounge at the airport to facilitate testing for military personnel.

But the service isn't just for service members. According to airport officials, some 70,000 people walk through BWI every day. FirstCall provides Covid testing and vaccination to airport employees and travelers and because the clinic is located outside of airport security, to visitors as well.

"We're one of the only ones in the nation to do this," says Ron Elfenbein, MD '00, medical director for FirstCall Medical Center.

Dr. Elfenbein is a board-certified emergency medicine doctor with privileges at several hospitals across the Eastern shore of Maryland and Delaware. He opened his first urgent care facility in Gambrills, Maryland, in 2016.

The idea to open a second location of FirstCall at BWI came shortly after—long before the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. The original goal was simply to provide physical exams, and routine and emergency health care to airport staff and travelers. But as with all else in the world, Covid changed everything.

Through a combination of foresight and tenacity, Elfenbein has successfully pivoted his business model

to respond to healthcare needs posed by the pandemic, resulting in tremendous public service as well as growth for his business. Prior to the pandemic, FirstCall had about 20 employees at one location. As of October 2021, the company had approximately 200 employees spread over two urgent care centers, three Covid-19 testing centers, two monoclonal antibody infusion centers, and a soon-to-be-deployed mobile testing unit. The company has tested more than a half million people and treated more than 2,500 with monoclonal antibodies.

"Covid-19 has impacted everybody," says Elfenbein. "We were able to be forward-thinking to provide needed public health services. In the process, that allowed us to grow as a business and provide about 180 new jobs, which is a great thing."

**I**t all began in early 2020 at the onset of the pandemic. "I looked at the rest of the world and could see what was going to happen in the United States," says Elfenbein.

That meant stocking up on testing supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE). Elfenbein and his staff spent countless hours sourcing PPE. "We were stood up by plenty of suppliers, but it was the perseverance to relentlessly keep calling, emailing, and meeting with people that paid off," he says.

As a result, FirstCall never ran out of PPE. Not when the county health department ran out. Not when the state health department ran out. FirstCall became a regional referral center, testing 500-600 patients daily at the height of the pandemic. "We've never turned anybody away because we didn't have the supplies or ability to treat somebody," he says.





Ron Elfenbein, MD '00, cuts the ribbon to officially open the FirstCall Medical Center at Baltimore-Washington International Airport. The urgent care center has become a hub for Covid testing, particularly for members of the military heading overseas.

FirstCall was even able to donate PPE to other doctors as well as to the Drug Enforcement Agency, which needed N95 masks for protection during an upcoming drug bust.

To help accommodate the numbers of patients needing testing, FirstCall opened three standalone Covid testing centers. At the height of the pandemic, FirstCall began visiting nursing homes to provide on-site Covid testing to staff and residents. “It was very labor intensive, but people were suffering and there was nobody to help,” says Elfenbein. “We stepped in and filled the void.”

When monoclonal antibody treatment became available, FirstCall successfully petitioned the state to open an infusion site. Shortly after, the company was approached by both the federal and Maryland departments of health and human services to run a second monoclonal site and rapid testing center outside FedEx Field, adjacent to a state-run PCR testing facility.

“We’re seeing a ton of volume, the busiest in the state,” says Elfenbein. “As of October, we were receiving 15 percent of the state allocation of monoclonal antibodies.”

Again, part of that volume is due to Elfenbein’s out-of-the-box thinking, which simplified the procedure for patients. “Initially, the process for a patient to get approval was very onerous and required a referral from a primary care physician,” he explains.

FirstCall set up a call center, where patients could call for a screening evaluation, or could be referred by a provider on site. “At some locations, patients who test

positive can simply go across the hallway to get infused right then and there,” he says.

“The more people that can get monoclonals the better,” explains Elfenbein. “You dramatically increase their chances of survival and decrease their chances of having to be hospitalized. Now, individuals considered high risk are able to get prophylactic monoclonal antibody treatment if they’ve been exposed to somebody who had Covid.”

He hopes to be able to expand treatment options to include mobile visits to nursing homes. “If someone has had an exposure, we could provide a prophylactic dose so that Covid doesn’t spread throughout the facility,” he says.

**E**lfenbein’s public health efforts during the pandemic extend beyond his own business. Along with a friend, Elfenbein started a nonprofit and raised \$10,000 to build intubation boxes that were donated to hospitals across the country. “It’s basically a plexiglass box with armholes. When you have to intubate someone, you put it over the patient and it decreases the amount of aerosolized particles so you reduce the risk of catching Covid for everyone in the room,” he explains.

His partner built the units in his garage. “We set up a website. When a hospital would make a request, we’d send one out,” says Elfenbein, who has become a regular guest on national news shows, providing a medical perspective on issues related to Covid testing and vaccination.



In life, Elfenbein believes it's important to "roll with the punches" and be open to embrace opportunities that come your way.

As an emergency medicine resident at Johns Hopkins University, Elfenbein frequently volunteered to serve as an on-site doctor for training missions at the nearby Secret Service Academy in Beltsville, Maryland. Subsequently, he was one of three residents chosen to accompany Secret Service members to the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City and provide medical care for the 5,000 Federal agents there.

"There were some in the residency program who were disgruntled about not being selected. But I remember the program director saying, 'whenever we ask for volunteers for anything, these are the people who always say yes,' he says. "That stuck with me."



Maryland Governor Larry Hogan presented Elfenbein with a citation of service to the citizens of Maryland for his efforts during the pandemic.

As an Upstate medical student, Elfenbein did a clerkship at the Johnson Space Center. While at Hopkins, he received a grant from NASA to develop a hands-free device to guide an astronaut through airway management in microgravity, for use on the space shuttle and space station.

Coming out of his chief resident year, Elfenbein applied to the space program to be an astronaut, becoming one of 200 to receive an interview out of 10,000 applicants.

At the time, Elfenbein's wife, Heather Symons, MD, was a fellow in pediatric oncology at Hopkins and knew she wanted to stay at the institution (she currently is clinical director of the pediatric bone marrow transplant program there). The couple settled in the Annapolis area of Maryland, and Elfenbein works at various hospitals in the region.

In the early 2000s, there was a crisis brewing in Maryland regarding proposed increases to malpractice insurance. Then-Governor Robert Ehrlich called a special

session of the legislature to deal with the issue. Elfenbein attended a rally at a park outside the State House. Frustrated by the lack of momentum, he began speaking to the crowd about why the issue was important and why the increase was untenable. "The next thing I knew, all these TV cameras were in my face," he recalls. Shortly after, Elfenbein was approached by the governor's office to run for state senate, which he did in 2010, and was narrowly defeated by the incumbent.

But he has no regrets. Undoubtedly, the connections made while running for office have helped him in his current endeavors. And he concedes the experience of crafting messages on the campaign trail likely led to his ease in dealing with the national media today.

"Things might not always go your way. You might not get the job you want. But it opens the door for other things, and you always have to be looking," he says.

Elfenbein's efforts to open a FirstCall site at BWI had been mired in the red tape of the Maryland Transportation Authority, but the pandemic spurred the process.

"I reached out and said, 'we got to get this moving,' and they were in agreement," Elfenbein recalls. "They kind of lit a fire under everyone because we all realized the need."

When the grand opening ceremony was held in August, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan was in attendance, presenting Elfenbein with a citation for service to the state of Maryland and its citizens.

He's most proud of the service FirstCall is able to provide to the U.S. service members who use BWI, something he's embarrassed to say he was unaware of beforehand. "I knew there was a big USO facility at BWI, but I had no idea this was a primary departure airport," he says.

Early on, there was a group of 16 soldiers who came to get tested five times within a two-week period because their flight kept getting canceled. "These poor guys. Covid testing is not a pleasant experience," Elfenbein recalls. "And they were coming to us at their own expense."

Once again, Elfenbein spotted a need. He found out where the soldiers were staying and sent a team to test them at their hotel.

Subsequently, FirstCall at BWI developed a system with the airport USO to communicate in a HIPAA-compliant way using Microsoft Teams. "The USO has comfortable furniture, free food, and entertainment. So, we have the military personnel hang out there, and we can message and say, 'send 10 people,' and that way nobody has to wait."

It all goes back to Elfenbein's philosophy of creating your own luck. "If you go out of your way to help other people, people will go out of their way to help you," he says. "The pandemic was a devastating thing, but I'm proud to have been able to seize opportunities and provide help where people needed it." ■