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VACCINE CLINIC SHOWS VALUE OF PARTNERSHIPS

PRESIDENT TRIBLE AUTHORS OP-ED PUBLISHED IN REGIONAL NEWSPAPERS.

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*Above: The COVID-19 vaccine clinic at Christopher Newport**Read time: about 2 min*

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Time and again I have watched with pride as this community weathered challenges with extraordinary compassion, heart, strength and determination. We are truly neighbors here. We care for each other. We stand together.

In these difficult and challenging times, we want our schoolteachers safely back in classrooms. We want our police and firefighters to work without fear of COVID-19. We want a glimmer of hope and light at the end of the tunnel.

Over the past several weeks, Christopher Newport University and agencies representing thousands of essential workers have demonstrated how a spirit of partnership can overcome mighty challenges, protect our essential workers and be that source of light when it is needed most.

Our fieldhouse has been the scene of a remarkable demonstration of what can be accomplished when community leaders, police and fire departments, schools and health care providers work together. If those taking on the daunting task of inoculating a nation need a shining example of how to make it work, this community could be their light.

The idea for this clinic was launched last month, when representatives of the Virginia Department of Health visited Christopher Newport's successful COVID testing for our returning students. Over three weekends, we tested more than 3,000 students. After their visit, health officials asked us if the university would consider allowing our fieldhouse to be used for a local vaccine clinic. We instruct and seek to inspire our students to live lives of service and significance. As an institution, we embrace the opportunity to model what we teach. We agreed.

The clinic would vaccinate public sector workers whose positions make them especially vulnerable. In a matter of days, capable colleagues from VDH, Peninsula Health District, city of Newport News, Newport News Public Schools, Newport News Fire and EMS, York County, York County Schools, York County Fire and Life Safety and Riverside Health System joined forces with our staff to set up an efficient opportunity for critical members of our community to be vaccinated.

There were phone calls and Zoom meetings, a lot of agreeing and a little wrangling. It was all done with a united purpose: this task was so important, so urgent that we had to get it right. We had to break through red tape and institutional barriers. We had to pull staff and volunteers from their regular jobs. We had to put needles in arms. We did.

The team cohesion and efficiency were impressive and breathtaking. More than 7,000 were vaccinated over five days, most in less than 45 minutes. These essential workers needed to get back to work. The attention to detail in the clinic operations visibly gave folks confidence. Even after many long days, all of the public agencies involved continued to work with unified purpose, ready with smiling eyes and encouraging words in the midst of the seriousness of their mission — a spirit that I am confident will endure beyond this single effort.

It was my privilege to join leaders of our partner agencies in welcoming Gov. Ralph Northam to observe the operation of the clinic. We are grateful for his leadership and kind words and his support for VDH and the Peninsula Health District who served as the organizing force that got this done. We are also very grateful for the many kind responses of individuals who were vaccinated. "How lucky we are to have community partners that make things work so efficiently," tweeted a principal. "Our teachers are grateful, some almost to the point of tears, for the peace of mind they received today," wrote an educator. "Thank you," was the simple message from so many others.

The virus is still very much with us. Many more vaccine clinics are necessary. We're off to a good start. To the incredible team that serves at this clinic, on behalf of the Christopher Newport family, I offer you my profound appreciation. You came together to make a difference for us all. Our community is safer than it was before. Unity works wonders.
