

CHARLES COUNTY'S NEW MEDICAL FACILITY CONSTRUCTED DURING PANDEMIC

In March, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly interrupted business activity in Charles County and across the nation, but it wasn't strong enough to stop construction on the county's new major medical facility by MedStar Shah Medical Group. In fact, the new 51,000-square-foot, three-story center at 301 and St. Patrick's Drive in Waldorf opened a month ahead of schedule on September 8th.

"When we planned this project three years ago, no one would have expected COVID-19," said Dr. Amish Shah, cardiologist and son of the medical group's founder, Dr. Vinod K. Shah. "The whole notion was to bring high-quality live care out to the community. And today, we're going to have that facility not only do live care, of course, but we are fully launched in telehealth services and televideo services."

Before COVID-19, telehealth was already an effective way to connect smaller communities like Charles County to healthcare services available in big cities like Washington DC, but telehealth has especially become an important player during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fortunately, this new facility was designed with that in mind.

In a post-COVID world, it is important to keep both patients and staff spaced apart. The larger building will allow them to space out patients with more waiting room space and more exam rooms. "That's huge because our model currently is that you come in and get put in your own private exam room as quickly as possible, and if you go to the waiting area, it's virtually empty with 6-feet-apart chairs," said Shah. "We want to minimize that wait."

Now that they're moving from what Shah calls a "defense posture" with the lockdown, where people were told to stay at home, they're now giving patients at their current facilities the option to be seen by a doctor live or via video, and they can match them up with a provider who can accommodate their needs.

A Construction Project During a Pandemic

Managing a construction project of this size, pandemic or not, is bound to come with a few bumps along the road. They had two—possibly three—COVID-19 cases among workmen over the six months of activity, but they were able to rotate shifts, do deep cleaning when needed, and separate workers in different parts of the building so that workmen could come in and out safely.

MedStar Shah Medical Group has 530 healthcare providers—130 doctors and about 400 support staff at similar facilities in St. Marys and Calvert Counties. Of the 530 providers, they've had

seven cases of COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic. All of those were contact traced to a social contact. The contact tracing was made possible through a partnership with the Charles County Health Department and area hospitals.

"The contact tracing has given our providers some comfort that showing up to work can be done safely," said Shah. "Yes, there are risks, but you can manage this. We can live with it—not the way we want to live with it, but we're going to have to until a vaccine and treatments are available."

But Shah noted, "This is not time to let off the gas in terms of what our safety protocols are. It's double down time actually, and staying the course with what we're doing until this is really behind us."



The new MedStar Shah project shows that even during a pandemic, you can progress and move forward. There will have to be some adjustments, but it can be successfully done. "To have an opening of a medical facility in the midst of a pandemic is such a good thing," said Economic Development Director Darréll Brown. "It speaks to the timeliness of it, and it will have a profound impact on the community." Shah replied, "I can't agree with you more."