



Erie at the Ukraine Border

Since the current humanitarian crisis in Ukraine began, Erie Family Health Centers has stood and continues to stand with our Ukrainian patients, team members, and communities both in Chicago and abroad.

Pediatrician and Co-Site Medical Director at Erie Evanston/Skokie Health Center Dr. Judith Horwitz Glassenberg was one of many who went the extra mile to aid those who needed help at the Poland-Ukraine border.

Judith has always been passionate about caring for others within her line of work in and out of Chicago. Whenever crises arise, Judith quickly looks for ways to use the skills she has acquired through many years of schooling and work experience.

“Dr. Sara Naureckas, my supervisor, will tell you that I have, twice before, emailed her saying, “Is it OK with Erie if I go?” said Judith. “I tried to go work in Texas when kids crossing the border were treated poorly. I tried to work in Wisconsin at the base where all the refugees from Afghanistan were being brought when they were evacuated from their country, but only Armed Services providers and doctors were able to go help them. This time, I waited until I had a more concrete thing to do before I emailed her about Ukraine.”

When she saw what was happening in Ukraine, Judith reached out to close friend and former Erie Site Medical Director Dr. Avery Hart for guidance in how she can best help those who were making their way to the Poland border and needed help.

Through Dr. Hart, Judith learned about Natan, an Israeli humanitarian organization that was actively sending people to the Poland-Ukraine border for medical assistance.

Dr. Avery Hart kept me in the loop. He went with their second two-week crew and by the time they got to the sixth crew they had run out of doctors in their immediate network who were willing to go. So, they sent out a request for everyone who had gone to try and tap their networks and he sent me the information. That's how I ended up going with this organization,” said Judith.

Judith said the care she provided varied from treating relatively mundane illnesses to dire situations. During the two weeks she was camped in a temporary refugee center, set up in an inoperative mall, Judith provided services for acute diseases, colds, minor injuries, and chronic condition care.

One of the many events that stood with her was a woman seeking care after surgery.

“There was a woman with stage 4 gall bladder cancer who had surgery two to three weeks prior in Ukraine but had to leave because the fighting came closer to her home,” said Judith. “She showed

up to us because her vital signs were unstable, and she was having trouble breathing. So, we sent her to the hospital, and she had a pulmonary embolism. She didn't want to go to the hospital. She wanted to get on a bus to Norway and continue her cancer treatment, but we had to tell her she wasn't going to make it to Norway. She needed go to the hospital in Poland first."

Encounters such as that one gave Judith something to think about once she returned to the United States. They also provided her perspective that would change the way she looked at her job at Erie and the world.

"The experience there has given me a deeper understanding of what it means to flee your home. Before Russia invaded, people left in an organized way. I don't think I'd really considered, other than reading stories, the practicalities of leaving your home when you require medical treatments that Poland doesn't provide, like the woman who arrived that relied on methadone maintenance, or you have a type of disorder that can't be treated because you don't have the paperwork describing the medication needed to be treated."

While in Poland, Judith noticed quite a few similarities between the people fleeing Ukraine and those seeking help in Chicago every day.

"Another thing that I have been mulling over more and has become clearer to me as I've been back at work is that the world is very much aware that what the people I was helping in Poland are going through is a trauma. But there are many of the same stressors in the lives of our patients. I think the world isn't quite as aware or doesn't think in as concrete a way about how daily life in Chicago can have a lot in common with people living in a war zone. Not knowing where your next meal will come from or how you're going to feed your kids is the same type of stress," said Judith.

In her work, Judith shares Erie's belief that healthcare is a human right, and high-quality care should have no boundaries.

"I feel grateful and lucky that I get to work at Erie because I think that it was so clear that the world descended upon eastern Poland to help these people, and the world doesn't always descend upon the people who need it here (in Chicago) in the same way," said Judith. "I think I've been grateful to work in a place where I can help address those same kinds of stressors and traumas at home and abroad."