

# 5 ways medical students can assist during the COVID-19 pandemic

MAR 25, 2020

**Brendan Murphy**

Senior News Writer

---

In-person classes are converting to remote options. Direct patient contact during clinical rotations is suspended. For medical students, the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically altered the course of training.

This has left a group of young trainees with aims on changing the future of the nation's health looking for ways they can help change its present, and students are taking the lead to identify appropriate roles.

It's important to note that both student organizers and health systems acknowledge that many of these activities must be entirely voluntary at this point and must not be linked to any form of academic incentive. That being said, here's a look at a few ideas for medical students eager to get involved during the pandemic.

## Phone triage

Health systems and public health entities are both looking to reduce the number of unnecessary patients coming into emergency rooms. Hotlines for potential patients are one way that can be done.

"Many practices have moved toward telemedicine, meaning not in a [video conferencing] setting, but meaning where patients call in and say what their symptoms are and if they should come in or not," said Senthil Rajasekaran, MD, senior associate dean for undergraduate medical education at Wayne State University School of Medicine. "By doing that [with adequate supervision] and telling a caller whether or not it looks like a COVID-19 situation, students can help reduce incoming traffic for nurse practitioners and physicians."

Learn how the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting medical schools.

## Childcare assistance

Numerous programs through which student volunteers offer childcare for health care workers spending long hours on the wards have come into existence. One such group is MN CovidSitters. Run by medical students at the University of Minnesota Medical Schools, MN CovidSitters says its “mission is to help healthcare providers in the Twin Cities/Metro Area who need help managing their household while serving at the frontlines during COVID-19,” according to its website.

Learn the four questions medical students are asking about COVID-19.

## In-direct patient outreach

Most medical schools have suspended any direct patient contact for medical students through April 1. Considering that, organization’s like Wayne State’s student-run free clinic have been put on hold. Still, students are finding ways to assist. Dr. Rajasekara said students have been offering to refill medications so that patients have a two-month supply to limit the need to return to clinic, while the clinic is operating in a minimal capacity. They also have re-organized the clinic’s medication room and labeled supplies and medications so they are easier to find.

## Research

Christine Petrin, a fourth-year medical student at Tulane University School of Medicine and AMA member, earned a master’s in public health prior to entering medical school. That background allowed her to examine data related to the COVID-19 pandemic in New Orleans in a different light. She found that case number data was largely being reported at the state level. When looking at it on the local level, the situation in New Orleans looks significantly more dire. She compiled per-capita case data in a file and tweeted it out, getting nearly 400 retweets, including from members of national media organizations.

“When I started tweeting about what I was collecting it was mostly trying to get national attention on New Orleans,” she said. “I felt that New Orleans should not be overlooked. Not only because the data looks scary, given the fact that we are a transportation hub, there is a reason to get more attention on New Orleans.”

## Test center in-take

As more COVID-19 drive-thru test centers get up and running, the need for staffing at them will increase.

A third-year medical student at Tulane University School of Medicine, Frances Gill is also active in the New Orleans Medical Reserve Corps, a local nonprofit that facilitates public health volunteering in times of crisis. Through that organization, Gill said several medical students volunteered to work at the COVID-19 test sites.

She will be doing her first shift at a test site this week. She expects to be doing patient in-take rather than conducting the actual tests.

“A lot of med students have turned out [at test sites] already,” she said. “People have been grateful for the opportunity to do something that is continuing their medical education but in a different form.”

For medical students looking to make an impact during the pandemic, Gill, an AMA member, offered this thought. “Don’t hold back,” she said. “There’s probably efforts that are unfolding in your city or your health system. If there isn’t, there are things that med students can easily organize themselves, like providing childcare for health workers or collecting PPE.”

Indeed, students are collaborating to share ideas and drive opportunities. One recent example: Audrey Zhang, a senior student at New York University Grossman School of Medicine, tweeted a link to a shared document that lists ideas contributed by students across the U.S. and Canada.

Moving forward, medical school administrators will collaborate to identify which opportunities are both appropriate for students and will contribute to competencies potentially eligible for academic credit. The latest recommendations from the Liaison Committee on Medical Education emphasize the importance of guarding student safety while acknowledging the need for local solutions based on local circumstances. An on-going discussion in the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Community (registration required) has been tackling the challenges of the pandemic for students and faculty members and how some schools are addressing the situation.

The AMA has developed a COVID-19 resource center as well as a physician’s guide to COVID-19 to



give doctors a comprehensive place to find the latest resources and updates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization. The AMA's COVID-19 FAQ will help physicians address patient concerns and offers advice on key issues such as how to optimize PPE supply.