

# Connection

NEWPORT HOSPITAL • 2023

## NEWPORT HOSPITAL MAKES ANDREA FEEL 'UNSTOPPABLE'

It was October of 2022, and Andrea Blair's life was about to change in a sudden and cruel way. "I wasn't feeling well for a few days," she remembers, "and one morning I woke up with tingling in my feet and having trouble walking . . . then my legs just gave out on me."

The cause of Andrea's mobility loss would later be identified as multiple sclerosis, a chronic, unpredictable disease of the central nervous system. In what felt like the blink of an eye, Andrea, a 36-year-old high school assistant principal, had her whole world turned upside down.

"I went from walking—and sometimes running—up three flights of stairs after young-uns who were skipping class to paralysis in my lower extremities in less than a week. It was life-changing and happened that fast."

Fortunately, the medical response was also fast. In a matter of just a few days, Andrea was transported from the hospital she received emergency services and stabilization at to Newport Hospital, where she immediately began intensive rehabilitation.

"When I arrived at Newport Hospital, my room was ready, and the nurses were in there waiting for me. They were all smiles and welcoming and their words were very reassuring," she recalls. "They dropped my anxiety level and made me feel at home."

They also got right to work.

Occupational and physical therapy started quickly, with 90 minutes of each every day being the norm. "Everyone on the team was invested in seeing the slightest progress," Andrea adds, "and I always felt like my health and well-being was their top priority."

During her six weeks of inpatient services at the award-winning Vanderbilt Rehabilitation Center, Andrea was among the first patients to undergo therapy using the hospital's

recently acquired EksoNR. A high-tech, wearable exoskeleton suit, the EksoNR re-teaches the brain and muscles on correct step patterns, weight shifting, and posture, with the goal of hopefully helping patients to walk properly on their own again.

Andrea jokes that she felt like a "cyborg or Transformer" donning the state-of-the-art apparatus, but marvels at how well it worked. "It really gives you the feeling that you're walking on your own and it trains you toward what's possible."

Now back home, Andrea puts into practice everything she learned at Vanderbilt and continues outpatient OT and PT three or four times a week.

Reflecting on her Newport Hospital experience, Andrea says, "Team" is not the right word to describe those caregivers. They're more like family. My slogan with them was 'I am unstoppable' because they empowered me with that feeling."



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—Andrea Blair

# CREATING A HEALING SPACE FOR NEWPORT'S MOST VULNERABLE TEENS



In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the demand for pediatric mental and behavioral health services has swelled to crisis level. Unfortunately, Rhode Island does not currently have the capacity to meet the increased need, leaving many patients waiting for help when they need it most.

On a more local level, the crisis has affected Newport Hospital's emergency department, according to Director of Emergency Services Lisa Lima-Tessier, RN. Increased demand for acute adolescent behavioral and mental health care—which began before the pandemic and has only intensified since—has led to what Lisa describes as a “heart wrenching challenge” in the ED.

Often, teenagers board in the hospital's emergency department for days or weeks while waiting for an inpatient bed to open on a dedicated psychiatric unit at another hospital.

This situation is anything but ideal for patients, who are in crisis and must wait to begin much-needed treatment,

including therapy. It is also difficult for staff doctors and nurses to serve patients experiencing mental health crises as well as they would like to while simultaneously managing the critical needs of those who walk through the doors with an array of emergency medical conditions, from heart attacks to broken bones.

“We need increased resources to prioritize these kids in the ED and triage them to an appropriate setting,” Lisa says. “We all want them to get the help that they desperately need.”

Given this difficult situation, the planned development of an eight-bed Adolescent Behavioral Health Unit at Newport Hospital is a “wish come true for these kids, for their families, for the community, and for our organization,” Lisa says.

Once the unit is complete, care will be provided in partnership with East Providence-based Bradley Hospital, the country's first psychiatric hospital for children. This will allow Newport Hospital to deliver Bradley's world-class pediatric behavioral and mental health care to more families closer to their homes on and around Aquidneck Island.

It will serve adolescents ages 12 to 18 years old who are struggling with things such as suicidal ideation and self-injury and need short-term stabilization, assessment, and treatment. Patients will spend time in safe individual rooms, as well as bright, modern group therapy areas. They will also have access to an outdoor enclosed garden area.

“This unit will be a wonderful step forward in addressing the state's pediatric mental health crisis,” Lisa says.

**To learn more about how you can support the Adolescent Behavioral Health Unit, contact Sara Meiowitz at 401-845-1617.**

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