

Greater Columbus' two Level I trauma centers see surge in gunshot wound patients

The raging gun violence means that Columbus' two level 1 trauma centers, OhioHealth Grant Medical Center and the Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center, are dealing with two pandemics.

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Mirella Rangel sat in the front passenger seat as her boyfriend pulled up outside the South Side house to drop off his friend after the three spent much of the morning March 20 at a gun show.

Before he departed the car, the backseat friend had a request that at the time seemed reasonable enough to Rangel: Could he take a look at the handgun she had purchased?

Ensuring the safety was on, Rangel obliged, handing the loaded weapon behind her to 18-year-old Alonzo B. Lewis. Moments later gunshots went off, piercing through the back of the passenger seat where she sat.

Though Rangel said she still doesn't know to this day whether it was accidental or intentional, Lewis is accused of pulling the trigger five times, striking her in her back, hindquarters, side and right arm.

Rangel's boyfriend rushed to the passenger side of the car as he frantically called 911. Rangel was transported in critical condition by Columbus fire medics to OhioHealth Grant Medical Center.

Lewis was soon arrested and charged with felonious assault. He remains in the Franklin County jail awaiting the resolution of his case, according to police and court records.

Rangel, 22, said she remained at Grant Medical Center for the next month-and-a-half as she underwent multiple operations and recovered from her wounds. The emotional scars, however, are taking even longer to heal.

“It was hard to process it at first because I couldn’t believe anything like that could happen to me,” Rangel said. “I know anyone can get shot, but I couldn’t believe it was actually me, myself.”

As gun violence skyrockets to record levels in Greater Columbus, Rangel was one of more than 500 patients treated with gunshot wounds at Grant Medical in the past fiscal year ending June 30 — a 74% increase from the two years prior, according to OhioHealth officials.

The Downtown hospital, one of two Level I trauma centers in Columbus designated to treat the most severely injured and one of 12 in Ohio, reports it is seeing the highest volume of gunshot wound victims in the hospital's history.

So far this year, Columbus police have been dispatched on more than 900 runs reported as shootings, records show. That figure does not account for calls coded as shots fired or for unknown reports that were later determined to be shootings.

By comparison, at this time in 2020 police had responded to a little over 700 reported shootings.

Just last week, 2021 became Columbus' second-deadliest year on record days before the city was marred by a surge of homicides when four killings occurred in a nine-hour period. As of early Monday afternoon, Columbus police homicide detectives had investigated 156 homicides so far this year, 19 shy of surpassing the record 175 homicides the city had in 2020 with more than three months left in the year.

At Greater Columbus' two Level I trauma centers — Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center is the other — medical professionals are working to stave off that grim milestone for as long as they can.

Yet the seemingly relentless gun violence has plagued not only Columbus, but major cities across the country. And it has led health care leaders to say they are essentially dealing with two pandemics at once as COVID-19 patients increase largely due to the spread of the delta variant among unvaccinated people.

“It’s absolutely something we’ve struggled with more than ever before,” said Urmil Pandya, medical director of Grant's trauma center. “I've never seen the health care system as a whole as at capacity and as overwhelmed as it's been.”

Both Grant and Wexner Medical Center are designated as Level I trauma centers by the American College of Surgeons — OSU Wexner since 1987 and

Grant since 2001 — for the comprehensive treatment and rehabilitation each provides for the most severe of injuries.

Despite the ongoing public health crisis from the pandemic, neither Level I trauma center has so far turned away patients, said Mark Conroy, medical director of the Wexner Medical Center's emergency department.

OSU Wexner Medical Center's trauma unit has treated 85 gunshot wound patients so far this year. In 2020, its trauma unit treated 112 patients for the entire year.

“Our staff has done an admirable job handling the strain of COVID on top of all the added violence,” Conroy said. “People are tired, but we’re a tight-knit team of individuals who rely on each other.”

With a team of 13 dedicated trauma surgeons, Grant touts itself as the largest trauma center in the state, evaluating more than 7,000 patients and admitting 6,000 each year.

For comparison, Cleveland Clinic, which has six dedicated trauma surgeons, evaluated 2,405 trauma patients in 2020 and admitted 1,816 to its level 1 trauma center, according to figures provided by a spokeswoman. Mercy Health's St. Elizabeth's Medical Center in Youngstown and its St. Vincent's Medical Center in Toledo each see up to about 2,200 trauma patients each year, a spokesman said.

Trauma patients make up 30% of all of the patients at Grant, Pandya said. Of the trauma patients, 12% are dealing with penetrating trauma (gunshots and stab wounds) as opposed to blunt force trauma.

In 2017, a \$5.7 million renovation of Grant's trauma space included increasing trauma bays from two to three and included the construction of a new helipad capable of dual landings, among other additions.

The following year, funding from Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost's office allowed Grant to launch a Trauma Recovery Center to provide victims of violent crimes with screenings, counseling, support and case management, said Geneva Sanford, who manages the center. The OhioHealth Foundation has provided additional funding to support the program.

As violence rages across the United States, such a program is seen by some experts as a critical piece in addressing and treating the root cause of violence.

Fatimah Loren Dreier, executive director of the Health Alliance for Violence Intervention, co-authored an April column in The Washington

Post pointing to research suggesting that with sufficient and dependable sources of funding, violence intervention strategies can reduce gun violence that disproportionately victimizes young Black men.

“People are dying and they’re dying in an incredibly concentrated way; it’s not evenly distributed across the population,” Loren Dreier said in an interview with The Dispatch. “It is incredibly important to understand this population and provide transformative support for them because if we can transform their lives, it can shift violence in cities.”

Loren Dreier's organization is specifically focused on hospital-based violence intervention programs serving patients who, because they have been shot or stabbed, are at high risk of falling into a cycle of retaliation and violence. HAVI works with hospitals and community leaders in 85 cities to provide high-risk patients with access to employment, housing, legal assistance, addiction treatment and mental health services once they’re discharged.

Loren Dreier points to cities like Oakland, which adopted a range of strategies and consistent funding, as an example of the effectiveness of such an approach. Since implementing its so-called “Cease Fire” strategy in 2012, Oakland experienced six consecutive years of gun violence reduction that culminated in a 50 percent overall decrease, Loren Dreier said.

“It’s a different perspective because it’s not waiting for the criminal justice system, which is only designed to punish people,” Loren Dreier said. “We want to make sure we can transform people’s lives, the next generation.”

Both Grant and the Wexner Medical Center operate similar programs designed to help trauma patients when they leave the hospital.

Last fall, Grant launched a one-year pilot program called VOICE — Violence, Outreach, Intervention and Community Engagement — partly based on Oakland's model. Columbus Public Health and the Columbus Department of Recreation and Parks are partners on the program, which connects social workers with people who have been shot, stabbed or assaulted.

So far, 26 patients have been part of the VOICE program, said Teresa Polisenio, an OhioHealth nurse who is the injury prevention coordinator working on the program.

Ohio State similarly operates the STAR program (Stress, Trauma And Resilience) through its Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health.

Rangel is part of the VOICE program, which she said helped her to get back on track after so many weeks of her life were lost to her hospital stay.

Six months since she was shot, Rangel now lives with family on the Northeast Side as she raises her 9-month-old daughter with her boyfriend.

Considering the life-threatening injuries Rangel sustained, she's made a remarkable recovery — she still returns regularly to Grant for physical therapy on her right arm as she attempts to regain her range of motion. She said she's still angry, but that anger hasn't overshadowed the new perspective she's gained having gone through such a harrowing ordeal.

"You really don't know everyone's full intentions no matter how long you know them," Rangel said. "You look at this like a second chance at life because, honestly, I could have died."

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