

U.S. Blood Industry Faces Blood Shortage Linked to COVID Pandemic, Three Years in its Wake

A conversation with New York Blood Center enterprises' head of public relations, Chelsey Smith on her experience working in the blood industry through crisis level blood shortages.



Photo: Chelsey Smith, Courtesy of Chelsey Smith

by Zoe Hansen, October 2023

The U.S. blood industry is still struggling to recover from the effects of coronavirus-era regulations on elective surgeries in hospitals and blood donation in schools and businesses.

U.S. hospitals were required by federal and state mandates to postpone elective surgeries in the spring of 2020, lowering the demand for blood in hospitals.

Now in 2023, the blood industry is struggling to keep their supply at pre-pandemic levels with nearly 50% less blood donations annually.

Before the coronavirus pandemic began in 2019, New York Blood Center enterprises collected about 75,000 units of blood annually, now they have only been receiving about 40,000 units each year since 2020.

New York Blood Center enterprises needs to see 2000 donors across their mobiles and permanent donor centers daily in order to collect the necessary amount of blood products to serve about 200 hospitals across the tri-state area, which is about 2000 units each day.

These needs are not being met.

Q: As the New York Blood Center Enterprises' director of public relations, what are your major roles?

A: I coordinate all of our press outreach across the 15 states that we service under the New York Blood Center enterprise so I work in conjunction with our corporate communications department. Essentially we will work to draft and pitch press releases for different blood drives or events or like with this one, the blood emergency. It's primarily my job to communicate the needs of New York Blood Center enterprises to our surrounding communities. Most recently when our blood supply drops to an emergency level I've had to communicate that to not only our community members, but our hospital partners.

Q: What has that additional outreach looked like for you with the crisis level lows?

A: Since the pandemic, essentially we've been in almost a near constant blood shortage across the country. And when we say that we're in a blood shortage, that means that we are not collecting the 7 to 10 days supply of blood products that we need to have on our shelves. Typically for New York Blood Center, we've been collecting around a five to six days supply at the most. And when it drops any lower than that that's when we reach emergency levels.

That happened a couple of weeks ago.

So we immediately started to draft our press release and reach out to not only our local media outlets, but also our blood drive partners, our donor base and we tried to reach our community to let them know hey, we're sitting on emergency levels and we need your help immediately.

Q: Since the pandemic, have there been less donors or has the demand just gone up?

A: So it is in the post pandemic world that demand has increased just a bit. I do think we do think that that's mainly because of those elective surgeries like we mentioned that were postponed. Those over the past several years have been rescheduled, doctors are doing more surgeries. But overall, I would say that the need is just rebounded to what it was pre COVID But our donations haven't.

Q: Since the pandemic, have you noticed a pretty consistent like less inflow of donors coming in or have there been ups and downs?

A: There have definitely been ups and downs but unfortunately we have not returned to the levels of blood donation we were experiencing pre-COVID...So it's a concern now, but it's also a concern long term for the safety of our blood supply. We need more donors from the millennial generation and from the Gen Z generation to donate. And to make that a lifelong habit because the older generations are aging out of our donor pool. So very quickly, we're going to have not enough blood donors.

Q: What is the NYBCe doing to remove barriers to donating blood?

A: Just a few weeks ago, we were able to implement the FDA's new guidelines concerning gay and bisexual men and their ability to donate blood. So we're constantly in a position of encouraging the FDA to reevaluate these guidelines that prevent people from being able to donate blood and part of that work has resulted in the FDA's research and changes to these policies just this year.

Q: In terms of how New York Blood Center enterprises conducts business, has anything changed as a result of the coronavirus pandemic?

A: Oh, absolutely. I think that COVID really exposed a lot of the problems with our healthcare system, and one of them is that we need more blood donors. We know that in the United States about 60% of the population is able to donate blood, yet only three to 4% of them actually do. So that means there's a huge percentage of eligible blood donors out there that don't donate blood. And we have since the pandemic been working very hard to try and figure out why that is.

It's been hard for us to get back into high schools and colleges. Many of them had to stop hosting blood drives during the pandemic and trying to get back in there and back in front of our youth generation has been a challenge.

Additionally, a lot of people are working from home permanently now so the workplace blood drives that we used to have pre-pandemic aren't happening in quite the same capacity.

Q: Would you say a lot of New York Blood Center enterprises employees worked remotely during the pandemic or are working remotely now?

A: Actually, no. So our industry is unique in that a lot of the work that we do cannot be done remotely. There are some workers that can work remotely occasionally, but for the most part, everybody else, you know, our frontline staff or phlebotomists, our account managers that host our blood drives, you know, they are boots on the ground and we have been throughout the entirety of the pandemic, we couldn't shut down with the rest of the world because we are critical to our healthcare system. So yeah, I think that there are more businesses outside of healthcare that might be working from home in a greater capacity than we are.

Q: Has New York Blood Center enterprises been hiring new employees to help in the blood shortage?

A: Yes, and no. We're always looking to develop new positions if we think that there are needs that aren't being met. One challenge that we have been dealing with, along with blood centers across the country in this post-pandemic world that we're in, is just trying to get back up to regular staffing levels. So just working to maintain our staff to make sure that we have enough team members on board that are able to go out to those blood drives and, and staff those fixates so that we are collecting the blood that we need to collect. I think that the priority right now is just maintaining the proper staffing levels that we need to operate.

Q: Would you say that the staffing shortage has had an effect on the blood shortage at all, like the ability to keep up with collecting the blood and keeping the center running?

A: Yeah, I always say no, actually, you know, the pandemic years have been such a roller coaster. But, you know, in the very beginning of the pandemic, hospitals weren't doing elective surgeries, which meant that they were using less blood. So we were able to keep up with the demand based on the staffing levels that we had at the time and what hospitals were needing from us and we've been able to meet hospital needs pretty consistently, ever since then, but again, it's an effort to make sure that we're maintaining not only staffing levels, but the the number of donors that are coming through our door and at times like this when we don't have enough donors, it's not so much that we don't have staff, it's that we don't have the donors right now. So trying to get donors in the door to make sure that we're able to meet that need is definitely a priority.

Q: Other blood centers are reporting low blood levels due to a rising demand for blood products to provide aid in climate change-related natural disasters. NYBC?

A: I wouldn't say that it isn't. I think that's a problem that the entire blood industry is facing. Because the reality of the situation is that when you have natural disasters that impact blood centers' ability to collect blood, it is the responsibility of the rest of us in the country to help them. That's the unique part about belonging to the health care system, the blood industry in the United States is that blood centers will step up and help others when they need it. And it's not even just natural disasters or climate, climate change related disasters, it's also mass shootings and, and things like that, that would

require, you know, a massive amount of blood products to be used all at once. We are a part of America's blood centers. And we have a very quick equipment network that we can reach out to if we were to ever experience shortages like that.

Q: So do you know of any specific instances that have happened recently where the New York Blood Center has had to step up and help someone out like that?

A: Hurricane Harvey hit the Texas area and blood centers down there were unable to collect blood for quite some time and New York Blood Center wasn't the only blood center that sent blood down there, but we did send blood there.

There have been other natural disasters like that over the years that if a blood center does call for help, and we have the inventory to help them we will.

That's also a huge reason why when we're in a blood emergency like this, it's so vital that we get donations in the door because God forbid something like that would happen when our inventory is this low.