



Gino Santorio, president and CEO of Broward Health.

JOCK FISTICK / SOUTH FLORIDA BUSINESS JOURNAL

[Email](#) [f Share](#) [in Share](#) [Tweet](#) [Share Article](#) [Print](#) [Order Reprints](#)



By **Brian Bandell** – Senior Reporter, South Florida Business Journal

15 minutes ago

COMPANIES IN THIS ARTICLE

Broward Health
Fort Lauderdale, FL
Hospital & Health Care
\$1.2B **8,447**
Revenue Employees

[See full profile >](#)

Broward Workshop, Inc.
Fort Lauderdale, FL

[See full profile >](#)

Gino Santorio wakes up every morning at 5:30 to perform intense exercises with a weighted vest strapped to his body.

Then, the real heavy lifting begins.

The Broward Health president and CEO is stuck in a marathon with no finish line in sight as the public health system scrambles to treat Covid-19 patients and protect its workers within the state's expanding hotspot for coronavirus transmissions.

The weight of facing the biggest public health threat in 100 years just 16 months into his tenure at the once-embattled health system is not lost on the 37-year-old.

“From an experience standpoint, the scariest part was not knowing the severity and span of what we were dealing with,” Santorio says.

There's little doubt that Santorio holds one of the most challenging CEO jobs in South Florida: leading a hospital system - once fraught with legal challenges and regulatory actions - in a region that's now a global hotspot for the Covid-19 pandemic.

At no other time has it been more apparent how much communities rely on well-run hospital systems to save lives. And Santorio knows that whether hospitals can adequately care for patients during the health crisis will be key to reopening the economy.

That's a lot of pressure for an executive who's relatively new to his role. But Santorio is lauded by business and civic leaders alike for his vision and authority, which has positioned the health system for success during the most stressful of times.

"He is running a huge and important health care organization that has had turmoil in the past, but Gino is the guy to provide the leadership to take Broward Health to a bright future," says City Furniture CEO [Keith Koenig](#), chair of the Broward Workshop, of which Santorio is a member. "This pandemic has been a challenge for us all, but I'm very impressed with how Gino has handled his new CEO role so far."

Timing is everything

When Covid-19 patients started showing up in South Florida emergency rooms in March, perhaps no local hospital system appeared as vulnerable as Broward Health. Prior to Santorio's arrival as CEO in late 2018, the organization went through a flurry of CEO and board member changes amid public disputes between leaders, lawsuits, questionable contracts and regulatory enforcement actions.

Under Santorio, Broward Health is on the road to recovery. He installed new leadership in key departments, increased the transparency of its board and improved financial performance.

Then the coronavirus pandemic hit.

If Covid-19 had occurred several years ago, under the previous Broward Health board, its services likely would have suffered dramatically, says [Dennis Smith](#), chairman of law firm Tripp Scott and a member of the Broward Workshop. Santorio is addressing its problems in a positive way, he says.

"That's not to say North Broward [Hospital District] doesn't have a way to go," Smith says. "But Gino, if we can hold onto him, is the guy who can help us get to [that finish line]."

Initial response

Broward Health got a jump on Covid-19 preparations because it recognized the severity of the coronavirus early in 2020, Santorio says.

Even in January, when the virus was mostly in China, he figured it would eventually impact South Florida because it's a big travel destination. He started procuring supplies when it was easier to find personal protective equipment (PPE) and local organizations were willing to sell it to Broward Health.

"We were never 100% sure until Covid-19 actually came and hit, and that's part of the catch-22," Santorio says. "You either overprepare and people criticize you for it, or you underprepare. I would rather be in the former bucket and overprepare."

By March and April, Broward Health's caregivers expressed alarm at how the public health crisis had unfolded in New York. Santorio responded with a massive education effort, making sure medical staff knew how to protect themselves from the virus. He mandated PPE for all clinical staff early on, and started in-house testing.

One of Santorio's key strategies involved creating a Covid-19 dashboard that tracked patient care in real time. The IT team monitored patient demographics, the drugs and other methods used to treat them, and the results.

The dashboard helped Broward Health determine the best treatments for Covid-19 patients, and that brought the mortality rate down when compared to the initial months of the pandemic, he adds.

"Our physicians started trying different things to see how they could improve care," Santorio says. "When they turned patients on their stomachs while on a ventilator, they found they had great success."

Still, Covid-19 hospital admissions have surged in South Florida as more people contract the virus. Like other local hospital systems, Broward Health suspended elective procedures in July to conserve resources for Covid-19 patients. Santorio says he has a surge capacity plan ready in case patient demand continues to accelerate, which could include bringing in outside providers.

"We're hoping this surge peaks soon, because the increase in hospitalizations and demands on our caregivers are a concern," Santorio says. "We can keep this up, but not indefinitely, as we must consider the physical and emotional well-being of our caregivers who have been on the front line for months."



Gino Santorio, president and CEO of Broward Health.

JOCK FISTICK / SOUTH FLORIDA BUSINESS JOURNAL

Providers sacrificing

In times of crisis, health care workers are asked to make enormous sacrifices. But health care providers have great challenges of their own as they care for their families during the pandemic, Santorio says.

Workers often can't be home with their children during the day or they fear bringing the virus home. So Broward Health worked with hotels to secure lower rates for employees who decided to avoid going home during the pandemic. It also partnered with the YMCA and Broward County Public Schools to provide child care. Mental health counseling has been made available via telehealth.

It's crucial for workers to know whether they have the virus. Santorio says Broward Health lets its providers know the results within 24 hours.

"The caregivers are constantly sacrificing every day they come to work, and I have a tremendous amount of respect for them," Santorio says. "People who choose to work in health care do it because it's a calling. They walk into the scariest place they can, and do so to help the community."

Despite major financial losses linked to Covid-19, Broward Health has not cut employees, Santorio says. It did request that some workers use future personal days now.

A number of other hospital systems in South Florida have laid off or furloughed hundreds of staff.

"We made a decision, and it certainly was financially difficult, but we felt we had an obligation to ensure the viability of the staff and vendors," Santorio says.

Communicating with employees without face-to-face meetings can be challenging, yet Santorio has found ways to virtually connect with more people. He conducts Webex video meetings with hundreds of employees daily. He leads task force meetings and "Ask the CEO" webinars that all employees can participate in.

Broward Health executives are more visible and in touch with employees than ever before, Santorio says.

“During a crisis, people’s character is really defined, and the leaders at Broward Health have really shined,” he says. “It makes me feel like there is nothing that can be thrown at this organization, with the managers and staff that we have, that we can’t handle.”

Stay-at-home dad

Like many company heads working through the Covid-19 era, Santorio misses the daily in-person interactions with his team.

Today, he mostly leads the 8,000-employee health system from his Boca Raton home, in between eating breakfast and lunch with his son. His wife is a speech pathologist usually out at work. So a nanny helps out, as Santorio’s day is jam-packed with virtual meetings.

The first days of working from home, he barely saw his son because he was so busy.

“I joke around and tell my secretary to schedule some driving time while I’m working from home because I have back-to-back meetings for 14 hours, with no breaks,” Santorio says.

He works in the office a couple days a week, with the corporate staff alternating in-office workdays to respect social distancing. They bring laptops from home and clean workspaces thoroughly between users. Santorio often holds virtual meetings with staff who are in the same office to keep that physical separation.

When the time is right, he isn’t fearful about visiting the hospitals to check in.

“I view that as one of the safer places,” Santorio says. “I have a mask and PPE. My wife is a hospital employee, not with Broward Health, and she works with Covid-positive patients. We don’t view it as overly risky.”

Pre-Covid-19, Santorio’s biggest stress reliever was practicing jiu-jitsu. But martial arts are out of the question for him during the pandemic, so his weighted vest workout will have to do.

While it relieves his stress, it’s not as fun.

“I definitely miss the routine I’m used to,” Santorio says.
