

# **A medical resident bought hair ties for a patient: Her acts of kindness initiative is now expanding to more hospitals**

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Credit: Sơn Bờm from Pexels

Noor Shaik rushed to the bedside of a patient with severe diabetes complications, who had remained upbeat while undergoing surgery to address a foot infection.

The woman was now crying uncontrollably, but not due to pain from her operation that morning. What caused her outburst was that her only hair tie had been lost in the [operating room](#).

And the wild curls she couldn't keep out of her face were a breaking point.

Shaik, a third-year neurology resident at Penn, ducked out during her break and returned with a \$3 pack of hair ties.

"Now she was crying with joy," Shaik recalled. "Three dollars at Target made her feel appreciated and valued."

The interaction was so meaningful to Shaik that she proposed creating a program through which health-care providers could expense small items that help make patients feel more at ease during their [hospital stay](#). The initiative, called PennHOPES, has been so popular with patients and providers at HUP that Penn is now expanding it to Pennsylvania Hospital and Penn Presbyterian Medical Center.

"My intention was to help patients, but seeing how providers are responding to it has been very heartwarming," Shaik said. "These small, meaningful moments also help us reconnect with why we got into medicine—to help people."

## **Cookies, slippers, a plush goat**

PennHOPES has so far spent about \$2,500 on 70 gifts.

Through the program, providers can request an Amazon gift card to buy a small pick-me-up or helpful item for a patient who will be at the hospital for at least five days. Gifts must be less than \$50 and cannot be related to their care. PennHOPES receives one or two requests a week.

Gifts have included cookies for a patient who spent their birthday in a hospital bed, reading glasses and a book for a patient who didn't enjoy watching the television in their room, and a shaving kit for a patient whose beard was getting stuck in their face mask.

The oncology department ordered fuzzy slippers for a patient who had been unable to walk because of a burning sensation in her feet after cancer treatment.

A plush goat toy gifted through the program comforted a young patient with epilepsy and [developmental disabilities](#), whose hospital bed was noticeably missing the farm of stuffed animals she slept with at home.

"She would hold onto that goat all night," Shaik said.

## **Small gift, big smile**

Small comfort items can make a big difference for patients like Mary Houston who have lengthy hospital stays for complex medical problems.

Houston, 49, who lives in Wilmington, spent two weeks at HUP's epilepsy monitoring unit in March. It was her third stay in recent months, but she was still trying to understand epilepsy, which she was diagnosed with at age 47.

Since having a grand mal seizure in 2022, she had to stop working as a clinical operations manager for Penn's living-donor program, could no longer drive, and had tried several different medications. At its worst, Houston experienced multiple seizures a day.

Houston had been at the hospital for almost two weeks when someone tossed a velvety-soft blanket into her lap, a gift from her care team, who knew how much she loved to cozy up.

"I was really smiling—and I had 13 probes that were surgically implanted in my brain," Houston said.

Doctors ultimately recommended a temporal lobectomy, a procedure to remove a part of the brain that contributes to seizures.

Houston underwent the procedure in May and has been at home since, recovering and waiting to see whether it helps reduce her symptoms.

The shimmery gray blanket from Penn is often across her lap as she does word puzzles to exercise her mind—at least when her catahoula leopard rescue dog, Luna, hasn't gotten to it first.

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