COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTERS & COVID-19 RECOVERY

WISCONSIN PRIMARY HEALTH CARE ASSOCIATION
Wisconsin's 17 Community Health Centers (CHCs) responded swiftly and efficiently to the COVID-19 public health emergency. Health Centers quickly operationalized telehealth services, emergency dental services, telephone triaging, respiratory clinics, testing capabilities, and COVID response lines while continuing to care for the most vulnerable patient populations and supporting the management of their chronic diseases. Health Centers provided care for patients while protecting the safety of their providers and continued to increase support to the communities they serve.

Community Health Centers are responsive, flexible, and innovative when it comes to providing care to their patients, and their response to the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. Health Centers are now looking towards the future and are preparing for recovery and the "new normal."

Recovery for Community Health Centers will focus on seven different areas and will incorporate a lens of health equity throughout implementation. These focus areas are:

- Telehealth
- Personal Protective Equipment
- Dental Operations
- Special Populations
- Social Determinants of Health
- Testing and Tracing
- Workforce

WPHCA recognizes that marginalized populations and people of color have suffered disproportionately during the COVID-19 crisis. African Americans and Latinx individuals are much more likely to die from the disease for many reasons, including health conditions resulting from systemic and historic inequities.

In order to address these systemic and historic inequities, WPHCA will be utilizing a health equity framework. Key to this approach is to create a mission of responsibility to reduce health inequities and disparities by understanding that healthcare interventions are just one piece of the puzzle. In order to incorporate this into our day to day work WPHCA will make health equity a strategic priority, deploy specific strategies to address the social determinants of health, and continuously analyze policy through a health equity lens.
Response
The increased flexibility and support for telehealth services during the pandemic has allowed Health Centers to greatly expand their ability to provide virtual care. All 17 Health Centers in the state now offer virtual visits to their patients. Most Health Centers adapted many of the services including medical, behavioral health, recovery services, and dental triage, to new virtual formats.

Recovery
As Community Health Centers ramp up in-person visits, telehealth will remain a critical component to keeping providers and patients safe and healthy, providing equitable care and support to patients across the state, and helping to decrease the impact of the surge of patients that need to return for care and treatment. Community Health Centers have been eager to provide telehealth services to vulnerable populations for years, and they are grateful for the ability to provide this service permanently, while utilizing additional flexibilities for telehealth services allowed during the pandemic. These telehealth services provide access to care for patients in rural communities, patients with limited transportation access, and those with chronic diseases who have additional difficulty connecting to clinical support.

CHC Commitment
- Increase support for equipment, workforce, and trainings to continue providing telehealth services.
- Support patients in adapting to new technology.

Needed Legislative Action
- Increase broadband access for patients across the state in order to have equitable access to telehealth services.
- Continued telehealth reimbursement from Medicaid, Medicare, and insurance providers.
- Increase support for telephone-only services, which have been critical in providing support to patients in rural areas.
PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

Response

With adequate PPE, Community Health Centers provided alternatives to the hospital emergency departments for urgent oral health and urgent medical issues. However, many Health Centers were left without an adequate supply of PPE and unable to access state and local supplies during the pandemic. Dental operations were the most impacted from this lack of PPE because local decision makers did not consider them essential. Health Centers were left to find individual solutions to this problem because they were not included as eligible providers in the state stockpile surveys and distribution lists.

Recovery

A direct and steady line of PPE is essential for Health Centers to provide urgent and emergency dental care to all those in need before ramping up services and providing routine in-person care. Without this direct and steady line of PPE, Health Centers are forced to choose between providing needed services or sufficiently protecting patients and providers. Health Centers will not risk the safety of patients and providers, which forces Health Centers to restrict scaling services to meet community need. Ensuring that Health Centers have adequate PPE is also critical in the event of a resurgence of COVID-19 to keep people out of emergency departments.

Health Centers will work with partners and government to ensure equitable access to PPE across the state in order to serve their patients, especially those in impacted and underserved communities.

CHC Commitment

- Ensure protective measures and guidance are being implemented at Health Centers, including the proper and extended use of PPE.
- Evaluate and implement PPE protocols for medical, dental, and behavioral health visits and provide continued support to these services.

Needed Legislative Action

- Maintain support for decontamination capacity, such as the Battelle decontamination unit, beyond the immediate national emergency, until N95 masks are readily available.
- Support any and all opportunities to bolster supply chain transparency, including building local and state capacity to guarantee a direct and steady line of PPE for providers and patients.
DENTAL OPERATIONS

Response
All Wisconsin Community Health Centers with onsite dental continued to provide emergency dental services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Health Centers also immediately responded to urgent dental needs by providing teledentistry services. These virtual services allowed providers to triage dental patients safely. Health Centers anticipate that they will continue to work on implementing these systems, even though this work is currently not reimbursable under normal circumstances.

Recovery
Community Health Centers provide a critical role as the dental health safety net in the state, and this safety net is at risk of collapsing. Dental operations are central to Health Centers’ viability, which has been severely compromised during this time. Due to the high risk of viral transmission during dental procedures, extra precautions are needed in the dental service line. Health Centers are ensuring that providers and staff have access to PPE, that physical and operational changes are being made to protect patients, and that patients understand the safety precautions being taken so they are willing to return to care. Health Centers have also played a critical role in partnering with schools to bring dental care to students through programs like Seal-a-Smile. Uncertainty regarding students’ return to school means that CHCs will need to re-evaluate what this school-based service will entail for the coming academic year.

CHC Commitment
- Implement all safety guidelines and updated protective measures in order to protect patients and providers.
- Ensure patient communication and safety before, during, and after the dental visit.
- Re-evaluate the rate of a dental visit incorporating new PPE guidelines.
- Reconfigure spaces and implement protocols for new social distancing guidelines.

Needed Legislative Action
- Increase revenue sources for supporting dental operations.
- Implementation and Medicaid reimbursement of teledentistry.

Health Centers will continue to provide a strong safety net for dental care access for patients with BadgerCare, no insurance, or limited dental access.
SPECIAL POPULATIONS

Response

It is clear that the virus is impacting some populations in the state more than others. Populations most impacted include low-income persons living and/or working in closer quarters to others, including homeless individuals, residents of public housing, and agricultural workers. These designated special populations are the very people that Community Health Centers serve. During the COVID-19 emergency, Health Centers were acutely aware of the impact that the pandemic had on these populations and provided patient education, testing, social support, and care to these individuals.

Recovery

Special populations continue to be at higher risk of contracting the virus. It is critical that isolation sites and diagnostic testing are available to these populations, regardless of status or ability to pay. Additionally, it is important to ensure proper cleaning and reconfiguration of public housing and shelter space in order to follow social distancing guidelines. Throughout the growing season, it is essential that universal testing for agricultural workers is available and implemented. Health Centers continue to play a critical role in providing trusted relationships with individuals experiencing homelessness and migrant and seasonal agricultural workers.

CHC Commitment

- Provide guidance for implementation of social distancing measures in public housing and shelters.
- Provide population-specific outreach, education, and guidance for navigating safety, testing, and care for special populations.

Needed Legislative Action

- Ensure that universal testing is available for migrant seasonal agricultural workers, people experiencing homelessness, and persons living in public housing.
- Increase ongoing availability of isolation sites for these populations in order to mitigate the spread of the disease.
Response
Community Health Centers recognize that access to health care is one part of what it means to live a healthy life. During the pandemic, Health Centers continued to provide outreach services that connect people to health insurance coverage, community resources, food and housing services, as well as provide masks and sanitizer to families in need.

Recovery
Health Centers have long provided a "one-stop shop" for health care needs for their patients. Health Centers provide enrollment assistance along with a long list of other services that enable patients to live a healthy life. In order to continue providing these services, many Health Centers need additional enabling service staff, a wider resource base and connection to community resources, increased funding for these services, and a direct line of resources, such as masks and hand sanitizer, for their patients to use at home. Connecting patients to services and resources increases health outcomes and reduces health care costs.

CHC Commitment
- Continue to provide connections to supports and existing resources in the community.
- Partner with organizations to provide necessary personal protective resources, such as masks and hand sanitizer, for patients in need.

Needed Legislative Action
- Provide a stable source of funding for holistic enabling service work at Community Health Centers.
- Expand funding to community-based initiatives that increase safe, affordable housing, and address food insecurity.
- Protect and ensure Medicaid coverage and access to services.
Response

Many Community Health Centers rapidly stood up COVID-19 testing capabilities quickly for patients with any symptoms. Some Health Centers were also able to provide testing for asymptomatic patients or family members of symptomatic patients. Health Centers across the state coordinated with state and local partners to make testing available for patients in underserved areas and disenfranchised populations.

Recovery

Health Centers know that continued testing capacity is critical for ongoing infectious disease management and see themselves as part of the solution. Governmental public health needs adequate resources to do effective surveillance and contact tracing to keep spread in check. Health Centers are constantly monitoring the current testing demand and capacity in order to respond appropriately to community need.

CHC Commitment

- Community Health Centers commit to working with local Public Health Departments and other local entities in order to be part of the solution to provide robust testing in the state.
- Continue to provide triaging, testing, and appropriate information for patients and community members.
- Explore reimbursement options for Health Center staff working as contact tracers.

Needed Legislative Action

- Fund public health with adequate resources for surveillance and contact tracing.
Response

The Health Center response to the pandemic included shifts in the utilization and deployment of Health Center staff. Health Centers have had to make difficult decisions in balancing staffing needs with rapidly changing service utilization affected by health safety orders. This has meant furloughing some staff and then redeploying staff into new roles as the response has evolved. Health Centers have also had to rapidly train staff in standing up new service lines such as telehealth, and implementing new processes and clinic flows.

Recovery

As Health Centers begin the process of ramping up service lines they will have to ensure the safety of their workforce. Health Centers are working on implementing plans and processes for continued flexibility in deploying staff in response to potential changes in the pandemic.

CHC Commitment

- Evaluate and reconfigure clinic space to ensure staff safety and comfort in returning to work.
- Promote safety for all workers by ensuring that all Health Centers have the guidance, supplies, and equipment needed to protect workers and patients.

Needed Legislative Action

- Continued flexibility and removal of barriers to provider licensing and certification so that CHCs can engage all eligible and interested providers.

Community Health Centers are committed to being flexible, understanding, and transparent of staffing changes that will have to occur as a result of the pandemic.