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## OP-ED

May 28, 2020

Community Health Centers: Please do not put routine care on the back burner, even in pandemic



*Caption: “The Swab Squad” at Lamprey Health Care, NH’s first Community Health Center, with locations in Nashua, Newmarket, and Raymond, provides testing for first responders and health care workers. From left to right: Megan Walsh, MA, Jameson Lassar, APRN, and Danielle Piso, MA*

May 28, 2020, by Tess Stack Kuenning

Community health centers have been a staple of communities in the Granite State for nearly 50 years, delivering an array of preventive and primary care services, including behavioral health, pediatric care, and oral health to almost 122,000 patients in every county. Community health centers offer comprehensive, patient-centered medical homes to all patients regardless of ability to pay. Their mission to provide primary health care to anyone who needs it, whether COVID-19-related or not, has been a guiding light amidst the challenges of the pandemic.

Community health centers’ administrative and clinical staff adapted to the changing health care environment with remarkable speed and creativity: switching to providing 80% virtual visits in a matter of days; screening everyone for temperature, cough, and signs of a respiratory ailment before they enter the door; delivering care outdoors, under tents and car-side (even handing out restaurant-style beepers) to keep patients and their staff safe; and offering drive-thru testing as part of a statewide strategy to expand capacity.

In caring for patients who are hardest hit by the pandemic, community health center staff and volunteers work with local partners, like the NH Food Bank and End 68 Hours of Hunger, to assist with food distribution and mitigate the impact of food insecurity on children and families. They are maintaining their food pantries and delivering food to people experiencing homelessness.

Another bright spot during the pandemic has been an overwhelming embracement of behavioral health services, thanks in large part to telehealth. Patients who were previously hesitant to engage in mental health treatment are more willing to participate from the comfort of their own homes. This illustrates that ensuring access to integrated primary care services (“the whole-body approach”) is an inherent part of overcoming our public health crisis. It is imperative that as we move forward, telehealth continues to be available to patients and health care providers.

Unfortunately, community health center staff are incredibly worried that patients are forgoing care. Many forgotten victims during this pandemic are those who are putting off medical appointments for everything from

diabetes management to cancer treatments, to prenatal care. It worries their health care teams to think about children going without vaccinations and well-child visits, and adults forgoing routine care related to the treatment of chronic diseases. The community health centers are experiencing a sharp reduction in inpatient visits (by about 50%) and this is certainly a public health concern for their patients and our state.

As New Hampshire, like other states, begins reopening outpatient health care services, the community health centers will assure their patients are safe. The community health centers are working with the State to secure the gloves, masks, gowns, hand sanitizer, and testing kits (including swabs) needed to practice safely. The State is working to provide essential protective equipment to any practice reopening given our “new normal” for business operations. Using protective equipment is the best practice according to subject matter experts in infection control. The community health center providers will assure patient safety by using protective equipment, including dental providers, because of the exposure to aerosols and droplets and given that many community health center practices fully integrate medical and dental services. Protective equipment is vital to patient safety.

Patients who do not have a primary care doctor should not avoid seeking care due to the pandemic: Your health comes first. Many of New Hampshire’s community health centers are accepting new patients, and many appointments can be provided over the telephone or internet. Community health centers are 100% dedicated to keeping their staff and patients safe and healthy. If you are in need of health care services, please visit [www.findahealthcenter.org](http://www.findahealthcenter.org). Your visit might be done over the phone or a tablet, or, depending on your health care needs, they might see you in your car or under a tent. Regardless, please do not delay necessary care.

*Tess Stack Kuening is president and CEO of the Bi-State Primary Care Association, which represents 14 New Hampshire Community Health Centers.*

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