



Community partners are the key mitigating acute care demands

BY ANGELA WILLIAMS, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 05/01/20 07:00 AM EDT
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Acute care doctors, nurses and public health officials are on the frontlines courageously battling COVID-19 to care for the patients and lessen the community spread. They are a vital piece of our country's health care system, but we cannot forget the amount of bona fide health care that is carried through community providers nationwide. At a time in which a dangerous precedent is being established that directly impacts the health care sector within the American landscape, community doctors and nonprofit organizations must also be recognized as partners on the frontlines of this battle.

Community doctors and nonprofit service organizations are an intrinsically critical component of the health care system: they greatly relieve the stresses put forth on the acute care systems that are so desperately overwhelmed right now. Unfortunately, the singular, and warranted, focus on the acute care system is keeping community doctors and nonprofit service organizations off the public health radar entirely. Our nation's health care landscape is a vital element of what sets us apart and makes us the greatest nation on Earth, and these community resources are providing services in the same way acute care doctors are, ensuring a continuum of wellness through unwavering health care delivery. A focus on the broader national health care network will ensure the best outcomes as we all face this COVID-19 pandemic.

Community doctors and home- and community-based providers are essential and will have significant influence in assuring that people are kept out of emergency rooms in order to alleviate the heavy burden the acute health care systems are carrying.

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When a crisis occurs, caregivers are among those hit the hardest. It has been widely reported that in the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak in China, caregivers were more likely than any other group to become infected. As a critical part of the health care infrastructure, particularly at community and individual levels, their unique potential contribution to pandemic preparedness cannot be overstated. With the onslaught of people who believe they are symptomatic flooding our hospitals, we need to support those who are working tirelessly to keep the “worried well” out of critical care facilities.

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As a leading provider of services for people with disabilities, veterans and seniors, Easterseals' national network of 68 affiliates partners with caregivers in communities across the nation to assure quality care for the 1.5 million consumers and families it serves annually. All caregivers are a part of the safety net network. For example, Easterseals partners with acute care hospitals around the country to provide next-step therapies and services for those who are recovering from acute care.

Through this time of unease and fear, resorting to hospital visits may seem like the moral and justified choice. Although hospitals are a key component to care, there are other community resources that provide services to help. Common-sense community preparedness represents perhaps the most effective means of improving ongoing community-level, pandemic resilience.

As we shift to the post-acute crisis, the burden of support will fall on community care workers. Definitions of what constitutes a health care worker differ between governmental organizations, and not all are inclusive of the broad network that includes caregivers. That is why we strongly urge Congress to focus on the entire health care network in the next COVID-19 bill. Priorities must highlight the need for a \$20 billion investment for the provision of home- and community-based services and support of the workforce providing those services:

- Increased funding for home and community-based services,
- Access to PPE for direct care workers,
- Increased production of PPE and ventilators nationally,
- Technical fixes to the recovery rebate and paid leave provisions of other COVID-19 legislation to ensure inclusion and equity for the disability community, and
- Inclusion of charitable nonprofits serving people with disabilities with up to 1,500 employees in the Paycheck Protection Program and EIDL program.

Guaranteeing the future viability of the entire health care continuum – from acute care in the hospital to home health care – will ensure that all Americans have access to the health care resources they need to thrive. The bill that makes the biggest difference will be the one that ensures patients remain healthy, active participants in the community.

Angela Williams is president and CEO of Easterseals, a leading provider of services for people with disabilities, veterans and seniors.

  

