



March 18, 2019

## Home care providers face staff, supply shortages during outbreak

Across the state, agencies that provide post-acute and long-term care to hundreds of thousands of patients in their homes are facing unique challenges during the Covid-19 outbreak.

Home care is inherently intimate—the polar opposite of social distancing. The patients are often older adults with multiple chronic conditions, who are most vulnerable to the coronavirus. Additionally, providers are reporting shortages in supplies and aides available to work as well as an abundance of priority patients in need of uninterrupted care.

The Home Care Association of New York State this week received an unprecedented number of responses from home health agencies to a survey on coronavirus concerns.

Out of more than 300 respondents, 67% said that they did not have enough personal protective equipment for their staff. About 45% said aide shortages are a major barrier in their response to the crisis, and about 45% said they have encountered patients and family members refusing caregivers entrance into the home.

Furthermore, responding agencies reported that they have more than 14,000 patients who require life-sustaining equipment or medication or highly skilled wound care, or who are unstable and don't have informal support. In the case of disasters or emergencies, the state requires that every effort be made to see such patients.

"One thing that home care agencies are doing to be able to respond in the event of staff shortages is to look at other priority levels and see to what extent those cases can be managed by working with family members, education over the phone, telehealth and remote monitoring systems," said Roger Noyes, director of communications at the Home Care Association of New York State.

Relaxed regulations, such as those to allow agencies to operate outside of their own geographic areas, where there may be more need, will also be important, Noyes said.

At RiseBoro Community Partnership, its home care division—which provides services to more than 700 clients in Brooklyn, Queens and Manhattan—is continuing as normal. But the organization, like many others, is running low on personal protection equipment for its workers.

Home health aides have concerns about their patients' health as well as their own, said Glenmore Matthews, vice president of home care at RiseBoro. Some are facing the added challenge of not having babysitting during school closures.

This week RiseBoro had to find replacement aides for some of its clients due to lack of child care, Matthews said. In recent weeks it's been educating staff electronically on safety measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19 while discontinuing in-person training. RiseBoro also is asking home care workers to stagger their visit times when possible to avoid high-traffic periods on crowded public transportation.

"My concern is, if the condition worsens, then it's going to reach a point where many home care workers will not be able to go to work," Matthews said.

To help alleviate some of that concern, RiseBoro has been identifying high-need patients without family members or informal caregivers. About 30% of its caseload meets that criterion. Accordingly, it's also been determining which workers may be able to stay with priority patients for extended periods of time, he said, the same way they would in a snowstorm.

In addition to patient and employee concerns, workforce shortages stand to have an impact on revenues, Matthews said. He is hopeful that recent measures to contain the virus work quickly.

"There is a lot of uncertainty," Matthews said, "which is creating panic and fear in workers as well as clients."

In the meantime, home care providers will be watching closely for additional regulatory waivers and the dispersal of emergency funds from federal legislation —Jennifer Henderson