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Groups to Train Home Care Clinicians on COVID-19 Testing Vital to NY's Reopening, Public Health & Safety

Just-announced Mother Cabrini Health Foundation grant will support joint statewide training effort being led by Home Care Association of New York State, Iroquois Healthcare Alliance, and Mohawk Valley Health System

New York's COVID-19 reopening plan hinges on the state's testing capabilities. Three organizations are joining forces to help build such potential in home health care, thanks to a grant from the Mother Cabrini Health Foundation.

Under this grant, the Home Care Association of New York State (HCA) will engage the training team of the Iroquois Healthcare Alliance (IHA) and the expertise of clinical faculty at the Mohawk Valley Health System (MVHS). Together they'll deliver and promote web-based training for as many as 18,000 home health RNs and other personnel on COVID-19 testing procedures that can be conducted at home.

As the current medical emergency has shown, the risk of COVID-19 infection is greatest in the community, where home and community-based organizations serve the medical, social and assistive needs of nearly 900,000 patients throughout New York State. These include some individuals with COVID-19 as well as New Yorkers at greatest risk: the elderly and persons with disabilities or suffering from a range of underlying, chronic health conditions.

Yet home care clinicians (nurses, physical therapists and respiratory therapists) remain an untapped resource for COVID-19 testing, even as their scope of practice permits it. According to a recent HCA survey of over 300 home care agencies who employ these front-line personnel, most organizations (over 86%) said they desire to provide testing in the home care setting but only about 3% had staff trained or equipped to do so.

"Our current structure mostly requires individuals to leave home to get tested for COVID-19," said HCA President Al Cardillo. "For homebound patients and others in home care, this structure is not only inconducive but it's also a potential danger to a patient's health, especially if the only available testing option is to go to a congregate setting. This initiative offers a path to testing-in-place for the safety of patients. It also promises more timely results for the protection of home

care personnel taking every precaution against exposure through protocols specific to confirmed COVID-19 cases.”

He added: “We thank the Mother Cabrini Health Foundation for their support of this initiative which will help assure the health and safety of vulnerable New Yorkers already served by home care, prevent hospitalizations through timely screening in the home, and achieve criteria of the Governor’s reopening plan.”

Home care providers have long functioned as vital supports for hospital partners in the safe discharge of patients home following a hospitalization. Home care also helps patients avoid entering a hospital to begin with, so that facility resources are best allocated to individuals with the most urgent needs. This role is fundamental in times of critical care surge planning, as with the recent and likely future waves of COVID-19 illness.

IHA, which represents over 50 hospitals and health systems in 32 upstate counties, will be utilizing its powerful HealthStream online training platform and its expertise as one of the state-designated long term care Workforce Investment Organizations (WIOs) to provide the delivery system for these upcoming trainings in home care. The platform has robust reporting capabilities that can track the number of clinicians taking and completing the coursework.

“Expanding COVID-19 testing capabilities to the home eases some of the pressure that has been placed on the hospital system as a result of this pandemic,” said IHA President & CEO Gary J. Fitzgerald. “It also helps to reduce potentially avoidable hospital admissions and readmissions while minimizing the spread of COVID-19 infection. HealthStream’s specialized online learning platform delivers crucial education to health care workers so that they can protect themselves and the community while providing their employer – in this case, home care agencies – with outcomes that can be measured in real-time.”

“We would also like to thank the Mother Cabrini Health Foundation for this opportunity and recognizing the importance of testing as a vital next step toward reopening and creating our new normal,” Fitzgerald added.

MVHS is a member of both IHA and HCA. It operates a full continuum of health services, including two acute care and emergency care hospitals and a home care agency serving residents of the Mohawk Valley and Central New York. Faculty from MVHS will bring this multi-setting perspective to create and deliver course content at the heart of this initiative.

“MVHS is pleased to be able to partner with HCA and IHA to provide training to clinicians on COVID-19 testing,” said Darlene Stromstad, FACHE, MVHS president/CEO. “We know testing is an important part in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and home care services are an excellent resource to perform these tests for those who cannot leave their homes. Home care provides vital services, such as skilled nursing, therapies and home health aides for patients so they can remain in their home while recovering from their illness. Adding COVID-19 testing to the many services provided not only helps identify those with the disease, but it keeps these people home where they are safe and can continue to heal.”

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