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The pandemic's not over: Health plan leaders at the Visiting Nurse Service say work continues to help those disproportionately affected

In the early days of the pandemic, leaders from VNSNY Choice Health Plans, part of the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, developed new measures to help members especially vulnerable to Covid-19.

That included working directly with pharmacies, behavioral health partners and local agencies focused on addressing food insecurity, as well as increasing new forms of communication with members about issues surrounding the coronavirus, VNSNY said. Now, as positivity rates across the region rise, leaders at VNSNY Choice say it's critical they continue such efforts to help address health disparities.

What all of the health plans have in common is that they serve some of the region's most vulnerable individuals—including the elderly and those living with HIV and other chronic conditions—helping them to receive services to allow them to remain in their homes and communities and out of hospitals and other institutional settings.

The pandemic has targeted the populations the health plans serve in a big way, said Dr. Hany Abdelaal, president of VNSNY Choice Health Plans.

The team had to react quickly, Abdelaal said, "in making sure our members were protected and that they were receiving the services that were vital to living at home and being able to survive."

That has included continuing communication with all members about their back-up plans, should their regular caregivers not be able to see them in the home, Abdelaal said. It also has involved ensuring members have 90-day supplies of durable medical equipment, such as oxygen, he said.

Jaime McDonald, director of care and utilization management, VNSNY Medicaid Managed Care HIV Special Needs Plan, said work began through outreach to members. Plans were developed with them, McDonald said, based on where they live and what could be provided to them.

To date, that has involved making sure members have food in the home—including through authorizing meals typically not part of health benefit packages—asking about members' symptoms and educating them about Covid, connecting those experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression with behavioral health providers, and working with pharmacies to ensure the delivery of critical medications.

It also has included a new text-messaging system to help ensure members receive the services and support they need at a time when there is the potential for gaps in access to care.

Overall, more investment in social determinants of health is essential, said Thomas Dwyer, senior vice president at VNSNY Choice SelectHealth.

Next year VNSNY Choice Total, a health plan for people who need help with daily activities such as walking, dressing and bathing to be able to stay safely in their homes, will change its over-the-counter health benefits card, loaded each month to pay for nonprescription health items, to an over-the-counter and grocery card, VNSNY said. The benefits will increase to \$132 from the current \$100 and will cover grocery items. Members may choose from a list of covered products available from network retailers, including grocery stores, bodegas and pharmacies.

Continuing education and outreach to members, including about a potential Covid-19 vaccine and the heightened importance of flu vaccinations this year, are a part of the process, said Esther Conteh, a registered nurse and associate vice president of care management, VNSNY MLTC Care Coordination.

When a Covid vaccine is available, VNSNY Choice Health Plans will promote access to it for its members as well as access to it in the home, Abdelaal said.

As for the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, it began [accepting](#) Covid-19 referrals from local hospitals for home health care services early in the pandemic to help alleviate some of the burden on hospitals. After taking on 1,409 recovering Covid-19 patients between April 1 and June 15 following hospital stays, VNSNY [discharged](#) 94% of them from home health care, according to a study published last month in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

On all fronts, the work will need to continue for some time, leaders from VNSNY Choice Health Plans said.

"The pandemic's not over—people are still getting exposed, people are still being hospitalized," Abdelaal said. "I think the pandemic has taken its toll on our membership," he added, saying that the organization's ongoing work to address health disparities and to keep people engaged and emotionally supported will be a primary focus heading into next year. —Jennifer Henderson