

Home healthcare agency to take COVID-19 referrals from hospitals

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The Visiting Nurse Service of New York is [accepting Covid-19](#) referrals from local hospitals. The goal is to offset some of the burden.

The approach comes with challenges, however.

"We want to do everything possible to alleviate the strain on the [New York metro area's hospital system](#)," said Michael Bernstein, executive vice president and chief administrative officer at VNSNY.

[For Covid-19 patients](#) who are stable enough to be discharged after a hospital stay, VNSNY will provide home care for their flulike symptoms and underlying medical conditions such as diabetes and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. The intent is to free up hospital beds for patients who are in serious condition and need ventilators.

"We are working rapidly to deploy more telehealth and remote patient visits," Bernstein said. Using virtual services for some routine visits enables more staff members to visit Covid-19 patients' homes.

The organization spent about \$200,000—an unbudgeted expense—to secure additional tablets and equipment for remote patient monitoring, he said. And it's spending hundreds of thousands of dollars more to buy personal protective equipment.

On top of masks, gowns and gloves, equipment needed to safely care for Covid-19 patients in their home includes disposable thermometers, stethoscopes and blood-pressure cuffs.

VNSNY will keep the equipment at patients' homes. Kits—which need to be replenished after five visits—also include 13-gallon trash bags for safely removing and disposing of materials.

As an extra precaution, home care visits for Covid-19 patients are being scheduled at the end of the workday. Aside from home care, VNSNY has begun providing hospice care for patients with the virus.

To help home care agencies better ease the burden hospitals are facing, Bernstein called for the federal government—with the support of state government—to ensure that agencies are using telemedicine to safely take care of other patients while diverting resources for those with the virus.

"It's critically important for the entire home care industry to be able to provide telehealth services and get fairly reimbursed for it," he said. The federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has not ruled that remote patient monitoring is a billable way to provide service.

"Home care is the infantry: We go into the field. We go into people's homes," Bernstein said. "As long as we are equipped with the right personal protective equipment, that's what we can do. And that can help alleviate the strain on the health care system."