



Department of Health

ANDREW M. CUOMO
Governor

HOWARD A. ZUCKER, M.D., J.D.
Commissioner

SALLY DRESLIN, M.S., R.N.
Executive Deputy Commissioner

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Dear Colleagues:

With all regions of the state now in either Phase 2, 3, or 4 of our New York Forward reopening, the Department of Health is focused on encouraging residents to maintain safe and healthy behaviors as they reengage with the workplace and all activities that the COVID-19 pandemic put on pause.

New York is not the same state and the Department is not the same agency we were at the start of March. As the Governor frequently says, we have no choice but to reimagine how we protect the health of our residents and how providers deliver care to meet the many challenges of COVID-19 and other threats that lie ahead. This month, I will discuss an important health management tool that has been fundamental to our offensive against the pandemic: telehealth. I will also cover National HIV Testing Day and PRIDE Month.

Reimagining Telehealth. Millions of Americans have turned to telehealth amid stay-at-home orders, including many who would otherwise struggle to access healthcare. Telehealth increases access to coordinated, patient-centered care, particularly in rural and medically underserved areas. It also establishes technology-enabled healthcare delivery as a basis for future innovations, such as those in artificial intelligence, and electronic medical record integration.

With the suspension of many in-person medical services in March, the State found itself in sudden need of broad telehealth expansions. We enabled all Medicaid providers in all situations to use a wide variety of communication methods to deliver services remotely during the state of emergency. These flexibilities have included pathways for New York State Medicaid reimbursement for telephonic assessment, monitoring, and evaluation and management when appropriate for the member.

It was inspiring to see New York State providers and health systems—especially in New York City and the metro area—rapidly expand telehealth services to ensure access to care. Many health systems offered telemedicine consultation for people with flu-like symptoms to help determine whether they needed testing and follow-up care. These telemed consults quickly adapted to offer tele-urgent care, which tremendously helped to contain the virus by preventing the mild to moderately ill from going to Emergency Departments.

The increase in telehealth services was amazing, especially in Downstate health systems:

- One system that conducted 800 telehealth visits in the one-year period from March 1, 2019, to March 1, 2020, had an astounding 121,000 visits in the first 18 days of March 2020.
- Other systems were handling up to 5,500 visits per day.
- All of these systems offered and continue to offer behavioral health counseling via telehealth.

Your response to this crisis is proof of telehealth's potential to improve care for everyone, regardless of a public health emergency.

During the crisis, Medicare lifted restrictions that limited telehealth payments to rural providers and doctors with existing relationships with patients, waived requirements that limited access for poorer and rural patients without broadband internet, expanded telehealth services to more healthcare settings like nursing homes and hospices, and relaxed privacy rules so that common video chat apps could be used for telehealth visits. Such federal expansions to telehealth policies mirrored much of what New York State had accomplished through our Medicaid program, even before the pandemic. New York has spent the past five years establishing telehealth within Medicaid-funded healthcare delivery, thus priming our system for the next level of technological innovation.

In May, the Governor created the Reimagine New York State Commission to build back better by combining what the State has learned during the COVID-19 pandemic with other new technologies to improve telehealth and broadband access. Led by Eric Schmidt, former Google CEO and Executive Chair and founder of Schmidt Futures, the 15-member Commission met this month to develop strategies to help integrate State practices and systems with the best advanced technology tools.

National HIV Testing Day and PRIDE Month. Every year we recognize National HIV Testing Day to encourage people to get tested for HIV, know their status, and get connected to prevention, care, and treatment. On June 27, we celebrated 25 years since first observing this date in 1995. We want all New Yorkers to know that HIV prevention, testing, and treatment are essential even during a pandemic. I encourage you to find ways to link your patients to testing, education, and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) as appropriate.

The Department's AIDS Institute has been accomplishing this in collaboration with community partners by expanding the current in-home HIV Test Giveaway (HHTG) program, utilizing HIV self-testing kits to ensure HIV screening is available while maintaining social distancing. The HHTG provides a virtual platform for community-based organizations to continue to support HIV prevention and vital linkage to care services during the COVID-19 crisis. As critical partners in ending the AIDS epidemic in New York State, we encourage you to help raise community awareness about this testing opportunity by sharing this [online eligibility survey](#) on your web and social media sites.

With the coronavirus pandemic, this has been a very different but no less exuberant PRIDE Month in New York State. The thirty days of June give us the opportunity to honor and celebrate LGBTQ New Yorkers—those who have paved the way for justice and equality and continue to share their narrative as a voice for change—and to celebrate the accomplishments of LGBTQ advocates. On June 15, the Supreme Court ruled that federal anti-bias law prohibits discrimination against LGBTQ Americans in the workplace—a monumental step toward ensuring justice and equality in the United States. The Department is encouraging all New Yorkers to prioritize virtual PRIDE events around the State and adhere to safe social distancing guidelines if attending small, in-person events, as allowable by regional reopening guidance. We look forward to strengthening our commitment to LGBTQ New Yorkers over the next year.

New York State has managed to avert untold tragedy during the 100+ days of this crisis. Everyone played a part in stopping the transmission of COVID-19. But I will never cease to marvel at how much our healthcare providers so willingly gave of themselves to keep our system functioning the way it should. Your sense of duty to your profession and your love for

your fellow New Yorkers inspires me more than anything else as Commissioner. Thank you again for your continued good work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Howard". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Howard A. Zucker, M.D., J.D.