



Pandemic Raises Questions about Keeping Essential Farm Workers and Families Safe & Healthy in Northwest Ohio

September 3, 2020

Meet Joe Liszak...



Joe Liszak is the Chief Executive Officer of Community Health Services (CHS), which has ten offices spread out over northwest Ohio, with its main office located in Fremont. CHS is a community health center that provides comprehensive medical and dental services to both adults and children in Hancock, Henry, Huron, Sandusky, Seneca, and Wood Counties with a particular focus on the underserved and uninsured communities. It operates a program for essential farmworkers workers during the growing and harvesting season in the northwest region.



Though they provide critical services, the COVID-19 crisis significantly affected their operations, forcing them to lay off 95% of dental staff and 40% of its overall staff. As of May 22, 2020 CHS was back at about 90% of its pre-pandemic staff. Stimulus funding through the CARES Act was critical in helping CHS maintain financial stability. Medicaid's revised telehealth policy also made it possible for CHS to remain viable and maintain contact with patients. CHS was able to maintain health coverage for employees who were laid off during this time.

Providing Child Well-care Services

CHS recognized the opportunities of the telehealth model and acted quickly to adopt it to maintain care for its community. This approach is working in that most of their patients have access to cell phones and they also report that they like telehealth – it's working for them. However, CHS realizes that not all care can occur online or by phone - in-person medical care is needed and they are encouraging patients to return to office visits. Parents have been reluctant to bring children back to the office since the beginning of the pandemic. According to CHS's quality manager, vaccinations rates slowdown in the winter months, and the 2020 second quarter is not likely to show a significant increase in vaccinations from the first quarter. CHS staff thought adults might delay care, but would not delay care for their children, but that turned out not to be the case. In conversations with hospital CEOs they are hearing the same thing--children are not coming in and this is also consistent with what the Ohio Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics is seeing statewide. In response, the CHS is reaching out to parents via phone to encourage them to bring children into the office or to do telehealth visits. Additionally, CHS also has a masters level nurse who in addition to tracking the data on immunizations and other aspects of well-child care, is leading a "Plan, Do, Study, Act" (PDSA) improvement cycle to improve the child immunization rate.

Serving Sick Children

CHS developed protocols to ensure that children and families can safely take advantage of in-person visits. Parents are asked to contact CHS if their child is sick, before coming into the health center. A telehealth visit will be set up to assess the child and determine the best approach to addressing the child's health needs. Children with temperatures that exceed 104 or showing other symptoms consistent with COVID-19 will not be admitted into the health center at arrival, but rather are asked to return to their vehicle where the visit is conducted via telehealth.



Making COVID-19 Testing Accessible

CHS also serves as a critical public health service in testing for COVID-19. The center began drive-through COVID-19 testing on June 15th at all its locations making it accessible to at-risk and under-served communities who may be at higher risk of exposure. Making testing easy and accessible also is a first step in mitigating community spread of the virus.

Supporting Behavioral Health

In addition to so many children throughout Ohio transitioning to distance learning they have lost regular routines and opportunities to be with their friends and teachers in the classroom, after school clubs and sports, and other face-to-face interactions. The loss of these social outlets can also spark an increase in social isolation, unhealthy coping mechanisms, and depression. The PDSA also is focused on adolescent depression screening and depression remission.

Protecting Essential Workers

CHS runs a program for essential farm workers. For the 2020 growing and harvesting seasons, CHS will perform most medical visits via telehealth and is working with growers to determine whether I-Pads can be made available to accommodate these health visits. However, the nature of manual labor and the crowded working conditions means that these individuals are at heightened risk and more is needed to ensure their safety and health, and that of their families, are tended to during and after this pandemic.

Policy Recommendations

Make the telemedicine expansion permanent. Telemedicine helps maintain continuity of care while also protecting patients and staff from unnecessary exposure to COVID-19 during the pandemic. A permanent expansion of telemedicine would address the issues of transportation and access to quality health care to populations in rural and underserved areas. Further, telemedicine should also be expanded to allow reimbursement for certain aspects of well-child visits that don't include immunizations, which of course, must be done in-person.

Protect Ohio Medicaid. Medicaid is serving many more people during the pandemic while unemployment rates remain high. It's important that Ohioans have access to quality healthcare during the pandemic and as Ohio moves to economic recovery.

Protect Funding for Community Health Centers. Northwest Ohio community health centers care for a large number of migrant farm workers, especially during the growing season. Many of these farm workers do not have access to health insurance and the policies of community health centers to treat everyone regardless of ability to pay is critical to keeping this population healthy. The Heroes Act passed by the House of Representatives in May contains \$7.6B in emergency funding for health centers including maintenance or expansion of health centers and capacity and staffing levels, as well as equipment and supplies for mobile testing.

Children's Defense Fund-Ohio thanks the individuals, families, and health practitioners who have shared their stories for the Child Watch Ohio series and the funders of the Ohio Finish Line project for their support. For more information, please contact Kelly Vyzral, Senior Health Policy Associate at kvyzral@childrensdefense.org.