

HCR Home Care Forms Bounce-Back Committee, Prepares for Fall COVID-19 Spike

HCR Home Care forming a bounce-back committee for fall COVID-19 spike

As home health agencies across the country continue to fight the coronavirus, HCR Home Care is looking ahead to its next battlefield: bouncing back from COVID-19 and preparing for any residual infection waves. That means establishing a bounce-back committee, a personal protective equipment (PPE) stockpile and new procedures and protocols. Previously a relatively minor expense for the home health care industry, PPE and tighter infection controls are likely to remain long-term priorities for all providers going forward.

"Health care has always traditionally been a reactive community, and I think being proactive and looking forward is what we're trending toward," Adrienne Mann, executive director of HCR's certified home health agency, told Home Health Care News. "The things that we are focusing on are getting our census back up, getting our patients more in alignment, getting our surgeries back on pace and working with our referral sources." Another immediate goal is bringing back HCR's team members as soon as practical. Based in Rochester, New York, HCR Home Care has spent more than 40 years serving patients in New York state, where it currently operates in four different regions, across a total of 25 counties. Some of those areas are rural, while others are more suburban. Because of that diverse footprint, each branch has felt the effects of the coronavirus differently, according to Mann.

At its worst, the virus led to an organization-wide census drop of about 15%, due to patient service refusals, early discharge requests and the suspension of elective surgeries. As a result, "a handful of team members" were furloughed. However, now, months later, volumes are back on the rise. "We touch base with [furloughed workers] on a weekly basis, if not more," Mann said. "As our census grows and we bring people back and acclimate them back to the new normal, we are ensuring that they are being heard." That responsiveness is also part of what helped the company decide which workers to furlough when volumes were down.

Amid the COVID-19 emergency, many home care providers nationwide were worried that caregivers and aides would drop out of the workforce. Some believed in-home workers would be too fearful of exposure while inside clients' homes, while others thought workers would opt for collecting new and enhanced COVID-19 unemployment benefits. HCR willingly furloughed employees who felt that working put them or their families at risk. "There are days when it might be a little bit more difficult to cover our visits, but we always make sure that our visits are covered and our patients are safe," Mann said. "We're also wanting to make sure that our team members are safe. Safe doesn't always necessarily mean PPE, but safe emotionally as well."

As HCR begins to bring back furloughed employees and examines how to bring office staff in rather than having them work remotely, it's also ramping up its mental health offerings, doing webinars and providing one-on-one assistance to those who may need it. To help ensure caregivers are physically safe, HCR is screening patients and all members of their households before visits. Additionally, caregivers are required to submit health data of their own daily. On top of that, HCR requires its various locations to report their PPE burn rates to ensure workers have what they need to safely treat patients at home. HCR infection control head Cynthia Stanley said the organization's usage numbers are much higher than usual, but stopped short of sharing specific numbers. "At first, PPE was a daily challenge," Stanley told HHCN. "Things have settled down a bit, and we have more of a definitive process by which we work with. We're really closely monitoring our burn rates now, and the state has been really great."

Now that HCR has the PPE it needs, its next goal is to establish an emergency stockpile. The aim is to have 30 days' worth of PPE ready to go so that it doesn't have to deal with the scarcity it experienced in March if the country sees another COVID-19 spike in fall. "Two months ago, everything was backordered," Stanley said. "Things are starting to trickle in again from a distribution standpoint, so we're able to order in small amounts." Stanley is also a member of HCR's new bounce-back committee, which is designed to get the company back up and running to pre-coronavirus levels and respond accordingly to any COVID-19 resurgences.

While the task isn't necessarily easy, it's one HCR feels it and the industry are well-positioned to tackle. "Home care agencies really have to understand we are a public health," Stanley said. "So, in that light, we are perfectly aligned to face the pandemic challenge."