

5 Ways Post-Acute Care Providers are Adapting to COVID-19

It's no secret that the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged post-acute care (PAC) providers. They are responding to an unprecedented strain on resources, staff, and systems while working to understand and implement national and regional guidelines. What may not be obvious is how providers are using innovation and their existing resources to meet those challenges head on.

“PAC providers in the Pittsburgh area have shown the ability of skilled nursing facilities (SNFs) and at-home care to support patients across the continuum, wherever they are located, under extraordinary circumstances,” said Cindy Vunovich, who oversees integration performance and strategy for both [HM Home & Community Services](#) (HMHCS) and Allegheny Health Network (AHN) [Healthcare@Home](#).

Here are 5 ways HMHCS has seen Highmark PAC providers improve common practices and enhance care delivery, thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. Focusing on Staff and Patient Education

At the onset of COVID-19, PAC providers saw fear and panic quickly rise among patients, families, and staff. Chad Meenan, regional director of operations for HCR ManorCare/ProMedica Senior Care, found education to be the most effective way to combat that fear.

“Information and regulations continue to change,” Meenan said. “So, we recognize the need for continuous education, especially for frontline staff and SNF administration, who then educate our patients.” SNF and at-home providers use education as an opportunity to emphasize and reiterate procedures specific to COVID-19 (social distancing), basic best practices (proper handwashing), and important staff procedures (infection control and PPE usage).

2. Embracing Telehealth and Virtual Care

As social distancing requirements began to threaten in-person care delivery, PAC providers turned to technology. Nurses now monitor patients' vital signs and weights remotely. Physicians connect with patients in multiple formats, such as “face-to-face” virtual appointments. The result? Patients are learning that certain conditions can be managed at home. They receive the care they need virtually, making them less likely to visit the hospital.

“Virtual visits, telemedicine, and the use of remote monitoring have always been an important part of HMHCS’s strategy for PAC,” Vunovich said. “The pandemic just opened those doors for us, and we increased our use of virtual technology to meet the needs of our patients remotely.”

3. Managing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Effectively

Managing and tracking supplies, specifically PPE, has been a challenge on many levels during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Meenan, SNFs had to quickly learn what PPE was needed and how to acquire more. In response, HCR ManorCare implemented a robust supply tracking system and its supply chain was quick to access needed items and get them to the centers.

To manage PPE for at-home care, AHN Healthcare@Home used their existing software and found new ways to manage supplies and deliverables related to COVID-19. “This tracking system works especially well for PPE,” Vunovich said. “We now know exactly what we have and how quickly we utilize those supplies.”

4. Adopting New Methods of Family and Patient Communication

The influx of COVID-19 information requires increased communication between providers and patients’ families. To handle large-scale communication, many providers are using their website more effectively to update families and push needed information out. “For day-to-day updates, we’ve made our website more robust by adding an easily accessible COVID-19 page,” Meenan said. “Families have learned to go there for information including daily center updates, our visitation policy and frequently asked questions. That practice is something we will continue.”

Providers are also adapting to COVID-19 restrictions on family visitation and group activities, including eating at the dining hall. Highmark providers are using corporate-supplied devices to present SNF activities remotely, and conduct virtual visits with families. These practices will continue to benefit patients whose condition requires isolation.

5. Reimagining the Roles of Post-Acute Care Staff

As capacity and staffing proved to be an issue early in the pandemic, providers had to think outside of the box. For many providers, the problem presented a long-term solution as they figured out how to manage staffing and essentially spread the workload.

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For at-home care, Vunovich says providers have shifted how they work. Intake staff is successfully working remotely. Various patient tasks previously performed by more than one health care professional are now handled by one worker in one visit. “We look at who really needs to visit each patient and who could best assess and meet all the patient’s needs,” she said. “We learned to utilize our staffing and resources much more efficiently.”

Facing Future Challenges in Post-Acute Care

While these pandemic-related changes have helped providers adapt to this new normal, challenges continue to arise. Both SNF and at-home providers need to find new ways to manage ongoing testing as regulations change. Procedures also need to be created or improved to address ongoing billing for virtual services and capacity issues.

HMHCS is committed to helping providers in these challenging circumstances. Visit [Highmark’s Provider Resource Center](#) for information and resources anytime you need extra support.