



## Primary Care Doctors Play A Vital Role in the Life of the Neediest

*By Mario J. Paredes*

OUR WORLD HAS BEEN TURNED UPSIDE DOWN. The coronavirus pandemic has wreaked havoc in the US, claiming over 560,000 lives and badly damaging the economy. The situation is complex, bewildering policymakers as well as ordinary men and women. Reasons for hope are few, and the road ahead is far from clear.

What is evident, however, is that the neediest have suffered disproportionately due to a gross lack of equitable access to quality health care—a deficit that preceded the pandemic. The Affordable Care Act was a significant step forward. Still, millions of vulnerable Americans do not have insurance. It's high time for a breakthrough in healthcare reform—and primary care doctors, serving on the front lines in low-income communities around the country, must be empowered to play a central role.

SOMOS Community Care, a network of 2,500 physicians, mostly primary care physicians (PCPs), serves close to 1 million of the neediest Medicaid patients in New York City. SOMOS has been providing quality care to the city's most underprivileged Hispanics, African Americans, and Asian Americans since 2014. In the process, the organization pioneered the development of what it labels Neighborhood-Based Primary Care, reinventing, reiterating, and restoring the role of the PCP as the family doctor of old—a trusted and pivotal leader in the community.

Fundamental to the success of SOMOS doctors has been the application of the Value-Based Payment (VBP) model. VBP or Pay-for-Performance incentivizes doctors to provide optimal care to their patients; the formula pays providers extra when their patients do better in the longer term—when they stay out of costly emergency rooms and hospital beds; quality care translates into significant savings for taxpayers. The focus is on preventive care, treating common illnesses, and keeping chronic conditions from getting out of control.

VBP stands in sharp contrast to the traditional, transactional, waste, and fraud-prone Medicaid payment model, which compensates doctors for discrete transactions—office visits, tests, etc.—treatment that does not necessarily add up to a holistic care package. VBP encourages doctors to provide comprehensive care and carefully coordinate all aspects of care, including when patients require a specialist. The primary care physician provides patients with a gateway to superior, holistic care that meets patients' medical, behavioral as well as social needs. That comprehensive care is managed by what is known as a medical practice-based Patient-Centered Medical Home.

SOMOS doctors rely on the support of Community Health Workers, who remind patients of medical appointments and inform physicians about their home life and family situations. This

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includes monitoring the so-called Social Determinants of Health, such as the quality of housing, the level of a neighborhood's access to fresh and healthy foods, unemployment, etc. SOMOS doctors also call upon Community-Based Organizations that specialize in various social issues.

Relying on their community networks, these physicians intimately know their patients' needs, which creates a bond of trust. That personal connection is further strengthened by the fact that a majority of SOMOS doctors share the same language and cultural background as their patients, often living and working in the same neighborhoods.

It, therefore, makes perfect sense if healthcare reform channels resources and support to community-based primary care doctors. These providers are often patients' first point of contact with the healthcare system. The quality of the relationship with their doctor encourages patients to stay with their primary care provider for years, ensuring a high level of consistent care, and over time ensuring good health for patients and their families. In sum, Value-Based Payment makes superior care for the most vulnerable provided by neighborhood-based PCPs affordable and sustainable.

Hence, local, state, and national governments should recognize the actual and potential contributions of primary care physicians. A greater part of the healthcare budget should be channeled to these crucial providers—an investment that pays dividends, and these dedicated men and women should be given a seat at the table and become a more significant part of the conversation about healthcare reform.

In late March, the unique position of SOMOS doctors in their communities was recognized when Gov. Andrew Cuomo authorized SOMOS physicians to begin distributing COVID-19 vaccines to their patients. They can reassure those wary of the vaccine and make it easy to get access to the vaccine for a population that is not at ease with going online to register for appointments. That population is largely one of color.

"We need to do vaccine equity," said New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, announcing the engagement of SOMOS physicians. He noted that New York City is 27 percent black, yet only 19 percent of that population is vaccinated; by contrast, the city is 53 percent white, and already 55 percent of these residents have been vaccinated.

Primary care physicians play a vital role in health care for the underprivileged. The degree of the most vulnerable Medicaid patients' access to comprehensive medical care is a bellwether for the fundamental health and wellbeing of our country. It is an indicator of the level of respect for the human dignity of all. Giving the neediest Americans access to quality health care will be an indispensable building block for a genuine and enduring regeneration and transformation of society in the wake of the pandemic.

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