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## **“Who Do People Trust?” asks Dr. Tallaj. Primary Care Doctors Hold the Key to Providing the Poor with Quality Health Care**

*By Mario J. Paredes*

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THE PANDEMIC HAS LAID BARE the fundamental inequality of access to quality health care in US society. The underserved, particularly people of color, have suffered disproportionately in terms of morbidity and fatalities; today, their access to coronavirus vaccines is far behind whites. What is badly needed is the support and empowerment of primary care physicians (PCPs) who directly serve those communities that are home to the most vulnerable Medicaid patients. They have a champion in the founder of a unique network of neighborhood doctors who are transforming health care for the neediest residents of New York City and who has been on the frontlines in serving the poor during the pandemic.

Dr. Ramon Tallaj, an internist, is the founder and chairman of SOMOS Community Care, a network of 2,500 physicians—most of them PCPs—serving some 1 million Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans in the city. SOMOS got its start in 2014 as a so-called Performing Provider System mandated by New York State’s Delivery System Reform Incentive Payment (DSRIP) program. With SOMOS, Dr. Tallaj pioneered the development of what he calls Neighborhood-Based Primary Care, restoring and strengthening the role of the PCP as the family doctor of old—a trusted and pivotal leader in the community.

The success of SOMOS doctors has come from the application of DSRIP’s Value-Based Payment (VBP) model. VBP or Pay-for-Performance rewards doctors who 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. The focus is on preventive care, treating common illnesses, and keeping chronic conditions from getting out of control. As Dr. Tallaj told the recent 2021 Virtual Healthy New York Summit, SOMOS has saved New York taxpayers more than \$336M by reducing ER and hospital admissions by more than 35 percent.

VBP sharply improves upon the traditional, transactional, waste, and fraud-prone Medicaid payment model, which compensates doctors for discrete transactions—office visits, tests, etc.—treatment that rarely adds up to a holistic care package. VBP encourages doctors to provide comprehensive care and carefully coordinate all aspects of care. The SOMOS primary care physician provides patients with a gateway to superior, holistic care that meets patients’ medical, behavioral, and social needs.



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Relying on Community Health Workers—their eyes and ears in the community—these physicians intimately know their patients’ needs, which creates a genuine 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.

“That’s where we live,” Dr. Tallaj told the health summit, “on the front lines” in New York City’s most impoverished neighborhoods— “we are here to serve.” He stressed that the pandemic has amply shown that smart spending in support of safety-net providers make it possible to provide the most vulnerable with affordable, sustainable, and superior health care—an antidote to an entrenched system that favors profit over equitable care for “those who suffer the most.”

“We need a switch toward Value-Based Payment,” he added, and “reimagine” health care for Medicaid patients, which holds the key to the city’s, the state’s, and the country’s post-pandemic recovery. “If we are to come back better, we need progressive changes to help people at the bottom,” added Dr. Tallaj. Such changes, above all, should recognize, cultivate, and draw on the strong bond between PCPs and their patients. “When we consider our patients,” he said, “we don’t see numbers but the faces of people we know.” “There has been a failure,” he continued, to “leverage that trust” between doctor and patient, a bond that is also vitally important for effective preventive care.

The urgent needs of Medicaid patients, he continued, include treatment poorly provided by the traditional Medicaid system: care for behavioral issues, people of color’s needs which increased 50-fold during the pandemic. Another area that demands attention said Dr. Tallaj, is telemedicine, which, he argued, must be user-friendly and genuinely serve the needs of the poor, rather than corporate, profit-oriented interests.

The SOMOS commitment to serve has been dramatically evident since the start of the pandemic when SOMOS doctors began testing staff at the New York Stock Exchange. Dr. Tallaj has fully committed SOMOS resources to fight the pandemic ever since. SOMOS doctors established testing centers throughout New York City—facilities that readily served people “with no papers.” SOMOS doctors continue to provide COVID-19 testing at dozens of New York City public and private schools. During the past year, twelve SOMOS doctors succumbed to the virus.

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SOMOS doctors will continue their service by distributing the coronavirus vaccines, an effort that is currently ramping up. With many in underserved communities harboring fears and doubts about getting vaccinated—as well as facing difficulties in making appointments online—the family doctor is in an ideal position to promote and provide vaccination. “Who do people trust?” asks Dr. Tallaj. The answer: their primary care provider, who, with the help of the Community Health Workers, is also able to call on people in the community who have not shown up at their practice for some time.

Dr. Tallaj hopes the SOMOS record of success will generate thus far absent political support for Value-Based Payment and counter outright opposition. PCPs, he insists, deserve a more significant share of funding, as SOMOS demonstrates the savings they can produce as by providing cost-effective excellent care. The willingness to spend its own budget on its anti-pandemic efforts should trigger greater public spending on SOMOS and its doctors. What’s needed, said Dr. Tallaj, is a genuine dialogue on healthcare reform—a discussion that does not hinge on profits but on “finding a solution for helping those who suffer the most.”

*Mario J. Paredes is CEO of SOMOS Community Care, a network of 2,500 independent physicians—most of them primary care providers—serving close to a million of New York City’s most vulnerable Medicaid patients.*

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