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NYS RECORDS NATION'S LOWEST 7-DAY AVERAGE COVID-19 INFECTION RATE

By Mario J. Paredes

June 14, 2021

ON JUNE 12, 2021, NEW YORK GOVERNOR ANDREW CUOMO announced remarkable news: from once being the epicenter of the coronavirus crisis in terms of the number of people infected and dying from COVID-19, New York State now leads the nation with the lowest 7-day average infection, or positivity rate of just 0.44 percent. Just days earlier, New York State had tied Massachusetts when that figure stood at 0.5 percent. The state's positivity rate has declined for 68 consecutive days.

Credit for reaching this milestone goes to the extraordinary efforts by federal authorities, Governor Cuomo, the New York State Department of Health, mayors across New York State, and Mayor Bill DeBlasio of New York City and the city's Department of Health. These officials have rallied all the troops, now switching the main focus from testing for the virus to distributing vaccines—though the two vital measures to combat the pandemic will, of course, continue to move hand-in-hand.

So far, more than 20 million COVID-19 vaccines have been distributed in New York State—with 104,457 New Yorkers getting shots on June 11-12. The state-wide vaccination rate stands at 69.5 percent, with 48.9 percent of all New Yorkers having received both shots. Hospitalizations have dropped below 700, while 11 people died on Jun 11.

Governor Cuomo, determined to bring New York State back to normal functioning as fast as possible, has spared no resources to get that job done. Earlier this year, he granted the request of Dr. Ramon Tallaj, chairman of our network of independent New York City doctors, known as SOMOS Community Care to participate in the distribution of the vaccine. Dr. Ramon Tallaj petitioned the Governor to engage his network of physicians in the vaccination effort, just as SOMOS doctors played—and are still playing—a major role in testing for the virus.

SOMOS is a network of some 2,500 physicians—most of them primary care doctors—serving close to a million of New York City's most vulnerable Medicaid patients, the bulk of them African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics. SOMOS doctors are neighborhood-based and in a perfect position to explain the importance of vaccination to a population not easily reached by government-run information campaigns.

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When the vaccination effort first began, New York State relied primarily on hospitals and other medical facilities to distribute the vaccine, an infrastructure that is harder to navigate and gain access to for the poor, especially people of color. Blacks and Hispanics, stressed the governor last March, have “less trust in the system” and have been skeptical about the safety and efficacy of the vaccine. Blacks and Hispanics have died from the virus in disproportionate numbers.

SOMOS doctors rely on their unique relationship with their patients to create a level of trust and comfort, moving people to become willing to be vaccinated. That strong doctor-patient bond—with the physician functioning like the family doctor of old—is greatly helped by the fact that the majority of SOMOS doctors speak the same language and share the cultural background of the people they serve and in whose communities the physicians are based. This cultural competence has proven to be key factor in doctors understanding the needs of the people in their care.

Currently, 200 SOMOS practices are participating in the distribution of the vaccine and local patients can make an appointment directly through SOMOS, or make an appointment with their regular doctor and get vaccinated right in the doctor’s office. To date, SOMOS doctors have distributed more than 1.5 million vaccines. That output includes SOMOS staff and physicians being authorized to distribute the vaccine at four mega sites—Yankee Stadium, Lehman College, Aqueduct Race Tracks and Bay Eden—as well as at a site in Hunts Point and at five pop-up sites, including ones at Penn Station, Grand Central Terminal, and the Empire State Building.

The New York State COVID-19 Vaccine Team encourages all doctors who are distributing the vaccine to list themselves as available on www.vaccines.gov. This way patients looking to get the vaccine in their neighborhood know whom to contact. Participating doctors are urged to report on their vaccine inventory using the New York State Immunization Information System.

New Yorkers are helping New Yorkers get back to normal, healthy and safe!

Mario 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.