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Gov. Cuomo Visits New York City Doctors' Headquarters, Renewing Hope For A Re-Establishment Of Mandate For Transformative Medicaid Delivery System

By Mario J. Paredes
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This occasion will go down as a milestone in the history of SOMOS Community Care, a network of more than 2,500 independent doctors—most of them primary care physicians—serving some 1 million of New York City's most vulnerable Medicaid patients. On July 8, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo visited the new Bronx headquarters of SOMOS in tribute to the organization's success in serving the neediest New Yorkers and the city at large.

The SOMOS record has earned public recognition, especially thanks to the organization's work—still ongoing—in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In his remarks before SOMOS leadership, staff and doctors, Gov. Cuomo thanked SOMOS for what he described as the heroic response of SOMOS from the very beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. That is when the organization answered the Governor's call and began testing staff at the New York Stock Exchange, ensuring the continued operation of a vital financial institution.

The Governor hailed SOMOS for its commitment to serving the most vulnerable by establishing and operating some of the first virus test sites in the city. SOMOS would run more than a dozen sites set up at churches across New York in the ensuing months. Gov. Cuomo acknowledged SOMOS doctors operating the sites as heroes, risking their lives for the good of New Yorkers; he paid special tribute to those doctors who made the ultimate sacrifice, losing their lives by serving on the frontlines.

SOMOS's commitment to respond to the pandemic continues today, thanks to the Governor's mandate for SOMOS doctors to distribute vaccines in their neighborhood-based practices. Trusted by their patients—with whom, in many cases, they share a cultural background—these doctors are in an ideal position to inform and reassure a population that otherwise would find it difficult to gain access to vaccines or might harbor doubts about getting vaccinated.

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Gov. Cuomo reflected on SOMOS's history as one of 25 Performing Provider Systems (PPS) under the DSRIP program, which he authorized in 2014 and which was funded by \$8B obtained from the federal government. Gov. Cuomo's statement is encouraging as SOMOS anticipates the launch of DSRIP 2.0., allowing the replication and continuation of a highly successful model of care for the most vulnerable patients—superior care that goes hand-in-hand with significant savings for New York State taxpayers.

The Governor noted that SOMOS's success was all the more remarkable as the organization was the only independent physicians' network among the PPSs, the other entities being part of hospital-based, large health-care conglomerates. SOMOS literally started from scratch and had to establish itself in an oft hostile, adversarial health-care universe that frowned on newcomers.

Gov. Cuomo praised SOMOS for demonstrating the power of Value-Based Payment (VBP)—the formula at the heart of DSRIP—to spur and incentivize physicians to, simply put, take better care of their patients. Under DSRIP, SOMOS revealed the vital role of primary care doctors, whose bond with their patients—based on cultural competence and intimate knowledge of all their needs, medical, behavioral, and social—holds the key to superior care.

DSRIP proved to be an enormous improvement over the waste and fraud-prone traditional fee-for-service Medicaid model. SOMOS succeeded in significantly reducing the prevalence of chronic conditions among its patient population, such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease; it also lowered alcohol and tobacco use. As a result, SOMOS sharply reduced the number of visits to the emergency room while also cutting back on unnecessary hospitalizations. Thus, SOMOS saved taxpayers more than \$300M.

Two men, in particular, have been the prime movers behind the success of SOMOS and Gov. Cuomo singled them out for praise: SOMOS Founder and Chairman Dr. Ramon Tallaj, the creator of SOMOS, whose tenacity, vision, and creativity the Governor applauded—Dr. Tallaj, he suggested, defied the odds and succeeded—and SOMOS communications consultant Henry Muñoz, whose communication and promotional campaigns helped build up SOMOS, and who played a vital role in educating the public about the importance of seeking care, particularly during the pandemic.

The Governor, saying he had authorized DSRIP as a supplement to the Affordable Care Act, advocated for petitioning the Biden Administration to make funding available to begin a second chapter for DSRIP, which saw its initial mandate conclude on March 31, 2021. The record of SOMOS, he made clear, has made an impact at the highest level of state and federal government. Thus, there is real reason to hope that the DSRIP mandate might be renewed.



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