



Health Care Strategy Insights: Managing the COVID-19 Surge

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As health systems usher in 2021 with a record-breaking surge in COVID-19 infections, it is apparent that the pandemic's dire outlook and uncertainty will likely continue well into the new year. With the virus' death toll in the US already exceeding 400,000, projections released by a large research institute anticipate an additional 164,000 deaths nationwide between January and May 2021 (for a cumulative total of 567,000 deaths) in their most likely scenario¹.

While outcomes have improved as physicians have learned more about the disease, some gains may be reduced as hospitals become overwhelmed due to all-time highs in COVID-19 cases. The continuing rise of infections poses new challenges for CSOs and their organizations, as difficult decisions must be made daily to manage capacity and support their clinician staff. With the ongoing surge, research projections indicate that 47 states will have high or extreme stress on hospital beds at some point before April 2021, and 49 states will have high or extreme stress on ICU capacity².

With the dire outlook of the pandemic going into 2021, CSOs should consider new strategies to react to the rapidly changing situation. Strategies to mitigate risk and manage capacity have typically leaned on shifting to virtual channels based on two key areas:

1) **Virtual health tools that can be scaled quickly and easily:**

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed an urgent need for quality care to be provided in virtual capabilities in order to control the stress placed on health care systems and protect providers and patients alike. Given the immense surge in hospital capacity brought upon by the pandemic, providers have quickly become reliant on virtual health services for both standard cases, such as yearly physical examinations, as well as critical cases, such as management of COVID-19 patients. In preparing for rapid deployment of virtual health tools, CSOs should consider how to prepare for quick scaling in the following [health care areas](#):

- In-patient care: Consider adopting health monitoring apps, communication platforms and wearables to allow for continuous monitoring of vital signs and symptoms from the patient's home for remote care administration
- Out-patient care: Look to tele-health consultation services with self-scheduling features and diverse communication channels to connect the provider and patient, such as video, chat and messaging

2) **Remote care management solutions:**

While research on COVID-19 is continually being updated, the pandemic has exacerbated the need for ongoing health management services to improve overall societal health. Deploying and accepting diverse remote care offerings can be necessary for health care organizations to stay competitive, adapt to changing consumer needs, and increase overall access to care. Remote care tools can be highly effective due to their ability to be individualized, allowing ongoing health care monitoring to improve in both quality and efficiency. Providers should work to integrate various remote health care tools into their standard care management procedures, such as:

- Tailored wearable health devices
- On-demand virtual wellness coaches
- AI-powered symptom trackers
- Remote Diagnostics

Through recent conversations with CSOs, CSOs have noted a range of

successful programs across organizations that have been implemented to manage surges related to COVID-19. Many successful organizations have taken a data-driven approach, using projections of COVID-19 peaks to inform strategic resource planning and reduce stress on the system. For direct patient care, integration of COVID-19 response algorithms can inform the best plan of care for individual cases and provides warnings for patients at higher risk for increased disease severity. Further strategies require engagement and activation of family and community support to assist with both prevention and dynamic response.

While positive news, such as the arrival and distribution of multiple COVID-19 vaccines may help to stem the tide and save lives, it is critical that CSOs and their health systems remain focused in the management of their talent, resources, and systems. Knowledge built during the initial surge of cases provides the opportunity for health systems to remain proactive and produce a positive outcome in the current and incoming COVID-19 surge.

1. COVID-19 Projections: United States of America. Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, 19 Jan. 2021, <https://covid19.healthdata.org/united-states-of-america?view=total-deaths&tab=trend>
2. COVID-19 Results Briefing: United States of America." Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, 17 Dec. 2020, www.healthdata.org/sites/default/files/files/Projects/COVID/briefing_US_20201217.pdf.
Based on estimated inpatient hospital usage; 10-19% of hospital beds occupied by COVID-19 patients is considered high stress, and greater than 20% is considered extreme stress. Based on estimated ICU usage; 30-59% of ICU beds occupied by COVID-19 patients is considered high stress, and greater than 60% is considered extreme stress

Please reach out to Josh, Bill F., or Bill L. with any additional questions.



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