

How a dedicated respiratory symptom clinic minimizes COVID-19 burden

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With the growing demand placed on physicians and other health professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic, team-based care takes center stage. To reduce the burden placed on health systems and physician practices, Bellin Health in Green Bay, Wisconsin created a respiratory symptom clinic to provide enhanced care for patients with all respiratory symptoms.

Bellin Health—a community-based nonprofit organization that provides patient-centered care to Northeast Wisconsin and Upper Michigan—closed a Bellevue, Wisconsin urgent care clinic to reallocate resources in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The urgent care clinic was closed so Bellin could shift staff to a new respiratory illness clinic.

This new clinic will handle all cold, influenza and related cases to separate patients and limit exposure to people visiting Bellin clinics for other care. Patients are still asked to call before being referred to the new respiratory clinic.

“We looked at other places in what the best practices are,” said Robert Mead, MD. “And best practices are to separate the patients who have respiratory illnesses into one location.”

The creation of a separate respiratory symptom clinic at Bellin Health serves two purposes during the COVID-19 pandemic, said Dr. Mead.

Protects those at highest risk

The move to centralize respiratory care will help limit other patients' exposure to respiratory illnesses. It also allows for respiratory specialists to screen and evaluate patients to provide guidance about further treatment.

Having a dedicated respiratory symptom clinic at Bellin, “keeps older patients away from people that are sick,” said Dr. Mead, adding that “this keeps most patients who could be contagious out of many of our other clinics, potentially decreasing the spread.”

Additionally, the respiratory symptom clinic allows other medical offices to continue to operate for non COVID-19 related acute problems. These other clinics are functional and continue to see patients. However, the goal is to control the flow in the waiting room while also making sure there are not a lot of people in the queue. This is accomplished by moving toward telehealth and informing all patients to call Bellin Health before visiting any clinic. From there, patients can be referred to the respiratory clinic as needed or care can be provided over the phone.

It helps to keep clinics focused on essential care and enforcing proper social distancing practices, especially for those patients who are at higher risk.

Preserves personal protective equipment

The new respiratory clinic currently has four physicians and staff members, with the number of health professionals varying depending on the need. The primary care volunteers who are currently staffing this clinic have had their usual patient volume taken over by physicians and advanced practice clinicians who remain at their original practice site—true team-based care in action.

By limiting the number of physicians and other health professionals at the respiratory clinic, Bellin can reduce the use of personal protective equipment (PPE). With the current shortage of PPE in communities across the country, clinics are finding smart ways to preserve these valuable resources as much as possible.

“It helps deal with the critical personal protective equipment supply shortages by concentrating the primary need for these resources at one site with a smaller group of providers,” said Dr. Mead, adding that “masks and eye protection are all in one location and we don’t have to spread it throughout the whole system.”

Learn more about other changes Bellin Health has made to team-based care to better address COVID-19 in Wisconsin.

The AMA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are closely monitoring the COVID-19 global pandemic. Learn more at the AMA COVID-19 resource center and consult the AMA’s physician guide to COVID-19.