Bringing quality certified PPE to physicians and communities

Watch the AMA’s daily COVID-19 update, with insights from AMA leaders and experts about the pandemic.

Featured topic and speakers

In today’s COVID-19 Update, Anne Miller, executive director of Project N95, and Kristen Tinny, vice president of AMA Member Programs, discuss the third collaboration with Project N95, a nonprofit, to bring PPE to AMA members and communities.

Learn more at the AMA COVID-19 resource center.

Speakers

- Anne Miller, executive director, Project N95
- Kristen Tinny, vice president, AMA Member Programs

Transcript

Unger: Hello. This is the American Medical Association’s COVID-19 Update. Today, we’ll hear the latest about PPE trends that we’ve seen throughout the pandemic and how the AMA is collaborating for the third time with Project N95, a nonprofit group bringing PPE to physicians and minoritized communities. I’m joined today by Anne Miller, executive director of Project N95 in Burlington, Vermont and Kristen Tinny, the AMA’s vice president of Member Programs in Chicago. I’m Todd Unger, AMA’s chief experience officer in Chicago.

Anne, Kristen, great to have you back again on the COVID-19 Update. A year ago, we were in really dire straits and hearing loud feedback from physicians and health care teams out there. They lacked proper PPE. Now one year later, are we seeing a change in that? And what is demand and supply looking at? Anne, why don’t you start?
Miller: At the beginning of the pandemic, we saw that the demand for PPE greatly outstripped supply and the U.S. had long been dependent upon PPE manufactured overseas, primarily from China. After that initial spike in demand, we saw a flurry of activity and investment on the part of domestic producers to create capacity in domestically made PPE. But one of the challenges we've seen now is that as production has ramped up to meet the demand, the demand for domestic PPE has not materialized for a variety of reasons. Today the issue continues to be about creating access to PPE more than it is about PPE being in short supply.

Unger: Well let's just kind of get into that. Why is there no demand? Or that demand for domestic supply not picked up? Why didn't it materialize?

Miller: Right. There's a couple of different reasons why. Some of it has to do with the buying patterns of hospitals, where they're accustomed to ... they source a single brand and they want to make sure that they still have access to that same brand. Certain brands or sizes may be harder to obtain, but in general there is sufficient supply. There's another issue with also that there is that procurement officers may be reluctant to try out a new product that they have some risk or a risk aversion with respect to trying out a product that they haven't used before.

Unger: It seems like kind of getting over that trust factor and building up the domestic supply, at least as it would be a pivotal part of avoiding this problem again in the future, no?

Miller: I think that there's a going to be an ongoing need for people to learn about the options that they have out of the domestically manufactured PPE. These are all FDA clear or NIOSH-certified respirators. People should learn about these different options and become more comfortable with using them as alternatives to their tried and true N95 respirators.

Unger: Well Anne, physicians, especially those in smaller practice, have cited the cost of PPE as being a tremendous financial strain during the pandemic. Have we seen the cost go down?

Miller: That's an interesting question, Todd. The prices have decreased considerably since the height of the pandemic as supply has improved. N95s manufactured in the U.S. actually are the most popular N95s on our own Project N95 marketplace shop and they make up 85% of total sales. We are seeing good demand on our marketplace for N95s and we have two prices come down probably more than 50% since the height of the pandemic.

Unger: Wow. That's pretty significant drop. And that's just increased supply or kind of catching up from the original kind of shortfall?

Miller: Right. There's a couple things going on there. The world demand for PPE and for N95s has decreased. There's actually greater supply from the usual sources overseas and then we have the increased supply from domestic manufacturers. Overall we're seeing pricing come down a lot. When
prices actually get to pre-pandemic level … but we’ve definitely seen prices decrease quite a bit in 2021.

**Unger:** Well Kristen, the AMA’s working again with Project N95 to offer PPE to its members at a reduced cost. Can you tell us a little bit more about the collaboration?

**Tinny:** Thanks, Todd. And thanks for having us back again. The AMA began working with Project N95 during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic to provide members with access to quality certified PPE, N95 respirators, isolation gowns and face shields. And through our first two campaigns, our collaboration helped to secure over 330,000 units of quality certified PPE for thousands of physicians across the country. And now we’re partnering again.

Our deadline to submit an order request this time around is Friday, April 23 at 3 p.m. and orders are going to ship on a rolling basis. Basically three to five business days after your order is placed, you can expect to receive your PPE with the exception of gloves, which will ship no later than May 31.

**Unger:** Why do you think it’s so important that the AMA is taking this step again in terms of the collaboration?

**Tinny:** It’s a really good question, especially considering millions of Americans have been vaccinated against COVID-19. Many physicians are still struggling to get access to quality certified PPE. In fact, more than one third of the 3,500 physicians that completed an AMA survey in 2020 reported that it was still difficult, very or extremely difficult, to get access to PPE. Smaller physicians practices reported even greater troubles. About 41% of physicians in a practice with five or fewer doctors said that PPE was extremely difficult to access. And then as you already mentioned, cost continues to remain an issue. Physician practices spending on PPE has risen by an average of 57% in 2020.

**Unger:** That’s incredible. That is a big expense. What kind of a PPE will be part of the program?

**Tinny:** This time around, you’ll see that we’re offering a variety of different types of masks to fit all different face shapes, surgical respirator masks, ASTM level-three surgical masks. We’re offering a lot of different masks and also patient exam gloves in a variety of sizes will be available on the Project N95 marketplace shop. These don’t carry a member discount, but they’re priced at market rate and being offered because of the really high demand that we’re seeing for gloves. Members can go to our website to get started. And after the short campaign is over, AMA members still have access to visit Project N95 to online shop. Prices may differ and the exact mix of products may vary based on the market availability.

**Unger:** Well, one thing I want to talk a little bit about, Anne, is this issue about fake PPE and this popped up in the news a couple of months ago, I'm sure it's causing great concern. How does Project N95 address counterfeit PPE? What do you do about that?
Miller: Todd, that's a really great question. And this has been one of the key concerns we've had for the entire pandemic is how do you know that the product is actually authentic and that it does what it says it's going to do. This is why we strictly vet all of our products and our suppliers. We have vetting playbooks for every category and we have separate supplier references and we go through everything with a fine-tooth comb.

Unger: One of the things I was surprised to find out about—I've heard about counterfeit masks for instance—but counterfeit gloves? What's up with that?

Miller: Gloves have been in super-hot demand and this has resulted in speculators who have entered the market just to trade the paper, to change title on the gloves. And there has been a flood of substandard products as well, taking advantage of this super-hot demand. And this is why we only purchase from factory or authorized resellers.

Unger: Okay. The good news is I'm not doing surgery and the bad news is when I'm pumping the gas with those gloves that I might've bought off of Amazon, you're saying they're not really protecting my hands necessarily.

Miller: That could be an issue, but fortunately you probably don't need a surgical glove to pump gas.

Unger: Okay. I feel better. Well, thank you. One other interesting thing that's going on with PPE on this round is a special effort to bring PPE to the community this time. Anne, can you talk about this special effort that's happening in the Chicago area?

Miller: I'm really delighted to talk about this. I have to say, Project N95 is a nonprofit, but we are also a volunteer-led organization and we care deeply about providing protection to as many people as possible, especially those in communities that have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. We're focusing on the Black, the Latinx, the tribal populations and the LGBTQ communities. And so we have really, this has been part of our mission to support these communities. And we found that one of the most effective ways to do this because all of this is a trust exercise, is that we work through trusted partnerships.

Project N95 and the AMA are facilitating the distribution of 180,000 masks to Chicago area nonprofits. And we know that we've reached out to the AMA to help facilitate this distribution because they have trusted relationships with partners who in turn have trusted relationships within their community that will lead us to be able to protect these people.

Unger: 180,000 masks, that is a lot. And Kristen, did you have any other kind of comments on how this came to pass?

Tinny: It's just, Anne mentioned, been a fantastic collaboration, both ways. We just feel extremely
fortunate to have worked with Project N95, especially at the height of the pandemic when the PPE was really difficult and extremely hard to find. And as Anne mentioned with minoritized and marginalized people particularly hard hit by COVID-19, this PPE can help keep the communities and its people safe. We've just been really excited to partner with Anne and her team on this initiative. It's been wonderful.

**Unger:** That's important too, because I think if you listened to yesterday's COVID-19 Update, or you look in the news, we can see we're not out of this. PPE, wearing masks, washing hands, keeping distance and of course getting a vaccine when you can remain incredibly important to keeping us from heading into a fourth surge. Well Anne, last question for you, when you think about what you've seen in terms of trends over the past year with PPE, can you talk about any lessons that you and Project N95 have learned that might benefit us in years to come?

**Miller:** I think about this question about the lessons learned that we have as an organization. And as I hear the news, I just heard another report today of a supplier that I am familiar with. And one clear lesson that we've learned from the world around us is that at Project N95, we are right to not compromise on our vetting of suppliers and products. We recognize that we've been in a trust exercise with our customers and that we have to stay true to our standards so that we can uphold our place as a trusted source of quality PPE.

Sometimes we have people knocking at our door saying, "We have this for you and it's a super great price," or something, but if we cannot verify the authenticity of that product, we do not enter into a transaction with them. It's really important to us to have vetted products and verified suppliers.

**Unger:** That makes a lot of sense. That trust factor takes time to build up, as you pointed out before. And it's tough to entertain new entrance into the marketplace because of that very issue.

**Miller:** There's one other thing that I think has really been a persisting feature of the pandemic has been this question of access. And we know that major institutions with purchasing power have pretty much been able to supply their needs, but these smaller and medium size institutions and then independent physician practices have had very much less access or have had to pay considerably higher prices. And so we've really been intent on breaking down those barriers to access. And we know that even as difficult as access might be for smaller physicians, that those groups that are minority or marginalized groups have even greater difficulty obtaining PPE. And so we continue to stay focused on breaking down those barriers to access.

**Unger:** Well, excellent. I can't tell you how impressed I am with the efforts that this collaboration has put forth over the past year. And I'm excited to see a third round of that to deal with that access issue that you've pointed out.

If you'd like to find out more about Project N95 and AMA's collaboration on PPE, check out the AMA website. And for more information on COVID-19 visit our resource center at ama-assn.org/covid-19.
That's it for today's segment. Thank you so much, Anne, Kristen, for being here today. Everybody out there, thanks for watching and please take care.

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