For the last ten months, I’ve had a front-row seat watching Medicaid Directors respond to and lead through the COVID pandemic. As 2020 comes to a close (good riddance!), I want to share what I’ve observed about these 56 individuals and how damn proud I am to support them as part of their national association.

In early March, I watched Medicaid Directors on both coasts be the first to experience the COVID virus as it spread through nursing homes and congregate care settings at alarming rates. Medicaid leaders immediately responded to the crisis in their states, working around the clock to understand the breadth and depth of the crisis, and develop their plans of attack. They launched multi-disciplinary strike teams, and worked in lock-step with other state agencies such as public health, behavioral health, food, housing and transportation. They also regularly made time to lay out - in stark and pragmatic terms - what the other Medicaid Directors should expect and prepare for once the pandemic reached their states.

From the very first days of the national public health emergency, I watched Medicaid Directors pull all available levers to make care as available and safe as possible for Medicaid members. Almost overnight, they simplified administrative requirements to facilitate member enrollment, and created alternatives to face-to-face enrollment offices and in-person application requirements. They rapidly expanded telehealth so that members could continue to access all different types of services. They made sure that kids could access pediatric providers remotely, that pregnant women could stay connected to prenatal care, and that people with substance use disorders could continue to get medication assisted treatment and addiction recovery treatment and support. I proudly observed Directors anticipate that Medicaid members who no longer had in-person day programs would still need to receive meals, and ensure those meals were safely delivered to homes. And of course, Medicaid programs provided needed care and coverage to members infected with COVID.

Medicaid Directors were not just focused on member needs, they were also acutely aware of the impact of the pandemic on Medicaid providers. I watched Directors pivot with equal nimbleness to buttress a delivery system under deep duress – either from utilization spiking or utilization plummeting. Directors pulled available policy and payment levers to keep providers and patients safe and connected. They targeted additional payments to nursing homes, home and community based service providers, and hospitals. They increased hourly wages and made hazard pay available for direct care workers. They worked with their health plans to use unspent premiums to support providers.

Medicaid Directors also spent an incredible amount of time advocating for federal support for Medicaid providers and educating federal officials about the limitations of the initial structures of the provider relief funds. And, when federal financial relief efforts for providers fell short,
Directors advocated fiercely for Medicaid providers, and spent hours reaching out to their providers and state associations time and again to underscore available funding opportunities, and to learn why providers were having difficulty accessing those funds.

2020 was not only about the pandemic. As a nation, we engaged in a new national conversation about racial justice and the lived experiences of people of color in our nation. As leaders, I observed Directors lead and support their staff and members through the social unrest after the death of George Floyd and others, and through the recognition that the COVID pandemic was disproportionately impacting communities of color and individuals with low incomes. I witnessed their deep personal despair and sadness, their renewed commitment to deepen their own understanding of racial inequities, and their recognition of the unique opportunity and obligation of being a Medicaid Director. I heard about the hard conversations they were having with their teams, and the discomfort some of them felt leading conversations while being part of the majority culture. I watched Medicaid programs across the country launch internal diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, commit to equitable hiring and promotion policies, and launch new initiatives in their programs to advance health equity.

In summary, over the last 10 months, I’ve seen Medicaid Directors demonstrate their very best during the very worst. They have affirmed – and reaffirmed - their unique role as national leaders in a public health emergency with responsibility for 74 million people. For their unrelenting commitment, hard work, and public service, I am deeply grateful.

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