Testimony of WellNow Urgent Care

Joint Legislative Budget Hearing – Health

February 25, 2021

WellNow Urgent Care has more than fifty urgent care clinics across Upstate New York that are strategically placed in rural and suburban communities that lack access to adequate healthcare resources. Our commitment to quality, affordable health care has created more than 1,000 jobs with a private investment of more than $50 million in Upstate since 2012.

WellNow has played a key role in the war against COVID here in New York. Since the beginning of this crisis, WellNow has administered more than 449,000 COVID tests with no appointment necessary. Year-to-date, WellNow has administered more than 10,800 virtual visits, saving insurance companies an average of $1,000 compared to the typical emergency room visit.

WellNow believes telehealth is an essential component of healthcare in the era of COVID and strongly supports universal telehealth access and parity. Telehealth has emerged as a preference among patients who want to avoid healthcare facilities but still seek treatment. This is especially true for at-risk patients or those quarantining at home who fear venturing out and risking exposure to the public, providers and other patients.

For many patients, remote telehealth visits can offer the opportunity to address medical concerns with a practitioner in their community while avoiding an in-person visit. In contrast, national telehealth platforms have doctors from all over the US, many of which practice outside of New York State. They also lack connection to regional health information organizations. WellNow is connected with local providers in various specialties to ensure patients have appropriate access and follow-up care. Urgent care is on track to continue controlling healthcare costs to New York State – but providers like WellNow are limited in their ability to serve communities to the maximal extent based on current reimbursement structure.

During the COVID pandemic, reimbursement rates for telehealth visits were increased to be on par with the cost of in-person visits. This incentivized an increase in telehealth utilization, allowing patients to access many healthcare services remotely. If the post-COVID rate environment reverts to pre-COVID, then the market is not sustainable. We must incentivize providers properly, and create rate parity to encourage telehealth sustainability, growth and innovation. If rate parity is not achieved, then rural and underserved patients will be hit the hardest. Many of these patients will have to travel farther for treatments and some may even forgo care altogether.

New York is a leader in the nation in technology, health, and creative partnerships between the public and private sectors. The continued effort to work across industry lines to provide more, higher quality care to New Yorkers is critical. Telehealth is a key component for the future of healthcare. New York must look not only at the health crisis we are facing today, but the future of healthcare delivery for the State and that begins with telehealth access and parity.