

Chronic Cataclysm: How the New York State Department of Health Escalates the Chronic Diseases Linked to Covid Deaths and Constant Community Ill Health

Testimony to Legislative Hearings by Chris Norwood Executive Director, Health People

There's a reason New York State had the most Covid deaths in the nation. It is because the New York State Department of Health absolutely refuses to have any coherent plan to either prevent chronic Disease---or help people who do have chronic disease achieve the good self-management that still protect their health.

I will start with diabetes. In the first surge of Covid in the spring of 2020, diabetes deaths in New York City increased by a staggering 356%---the most in the nation---and state diabetes deaths outside New York City increased them most of any state. International studies, however, soon made clear that these Deaths---along with serious complications like heart, lung and kidney injury --- were mainly occurring in people with diabetes whose blood sugar was in poor control. At the time, my organization, Health People, was providing the only community diabetes self-management program in the South Bronx, teaching thousands of people with diabetes how to lower their blood sugar and achieve good control.

The state completely defunded and destroyed this vital community self-care initiative just as it become clear that good blood sugar control was vital to survival during Covid. The Bronx, to no Surprise, for the first 6 months of the epidemic had the highest Covid death rate of any New York State County.

New York State has 2 million people with diabetes, some 600,000 on Medicaid. To this day, despite what should be the lessen of unprecedented diabetes death rates, the state Department of Health still refuses to support a single self-care community-based initiative anywhere in New York State. The 6-session Diabetes Self-management Program we were providing is well proven to help people with type 2 diabetes reduce blood sugar, weight, depression and multiple diabetes complications. It slashes new cases of kidney disease by 90% in the first year after participation---which means it also slashes the number of New Yorkers who will be chained to dialysis.

Most important, communities, themselves, can take the lead to deliver this kind of life-saving education. Our organization, Health People, entirely trained people with diabetes and pre-diabetes from the community to be the educators. They engaged almost 2,000 people with type 2 diabetes on Medicaid in this life-saving self-care education---probably a record for the nation---before New York State, itself, stopped them.

It is especially this model---of communities taking the lead in the renewal of their health--- that the state disdains and destroy.

All the other major Covid-related chronic diseases---including heart disease, hypertension, obesity and kidney disease---can also be reduced though this kind of community led peer education.

Please let's fully recognize that the terrible burden of chronic disease that so hurts our low-income communities---is not necessary. People do not have to be this sick!

The state health department---through contempt and indifference---is letting them be this sick!

It is not interested in even the mammoth savings that proven chronic disease self-care education reaps. New York has let people with diabetes get so sick that it has the highest excess costs for Medicaid patients with diabetes in the nation---more than \$15,000 extra per diabetic per year. Yet, the DSMP saves \$2,200 in reduced costs per patient in just the first year. If even 10% of the state's 600,000 Medicaid recipients with diabetes had access to the DSMP, that would save \$132 million in Medicaid costs!

The legislature worked to fight chronic disease two years ago when it ordered the state to include diabetes prevention as a Medicaid benefit.

In our current crisis you can be so life-saving. Please assure that the billions in health funding expected from Washington, for once, truly does go to build health. Please assure that a minimum of \$250 million of that is devoted to establishing community-led chronic disease self-care education initiatives throughout the state---initiatives that will finally build health in New York---even as, over time they outrightly pay back their cost.

Thank you

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