



BOOM!Health Testimony
for
Joint Senate and Assembly Public Hearing
On
The New York Health Act
Wednesday, October 23, 2019

BOOM!Health is a community-based nonprofit organization in the Bronx, NY and is deeply committed to a vision of health, wellness and safety for all, particularly the needs of marginalized and stigmatized communities at highest risk of homelessness, overdose, HIV, Hepatitis C, and other chronic health conditions. Guided by an ethos of harm reduction, we aim to remove barriers to accessing primary care, as well as HIV and Hep C prevention services, while supporting participants on their journey towards wellness and self-sufficiency.

Access to health care is a critical right for every citizen; while New York has been a leader in ensuring vulnerable communities have access to basic health services, we still very much live in a two tiered system where socioeconomic status and other determinants of health reinforce health disparities. It is not just about access to health insurance, though it is important that the remaining 5% of uninsured New Yorkers have access to coverage. Unfortunately, the access to insurance does not mean access to equal care.

At BOOM!Health, a majority of our participants are covered through Medicaid, and have access to health care; however, barriers continue to persist for some of the most marginalized New Yorkers, including those who are homeless, struggling with substance use, and dealing with chronic medical and/or mental health conditions. Our staff consistently need to help navigate and advocate for our participants in order to access myriad basic medical services, including specialty care, drug treatment services, and mental health care. Often, appointments are made within weeks, not days, and often having a medical appointment still requires hours long wait times at the provider. Participants often struggle to obtain paper work required for benefits such as rental or cash assistance and other services. Add to that the stigma people experience for being homeless or unstably housed, or with a history of substance use, and it's no wonder people sometimes forgo regular and preventative care and instead utilize emergency departments when in acute need.

We have encountered situations where participants are ready and willing to access treatment for substance use, only to be delayed by the bureaucracy of managed care organizations including issues like prior authorization and other restrictions. There have been situations where participants have identified a provider only to be delayed because their MCO is not accepted. We have had participants be denied lifesaving Hepatitis C treatment because of insurance restrictions, and have had to work tirelessly with providers in order to advocate for coverage of some medications.

We know that preventative care is crucial for medical cost savings. We also know that when healthcare providers are paid differently by insurance providers, they understandably prefer those that will reimburse at a higher rate. That in itself limits options for people without private insurance, and

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disproportionally impacts communities with high poverty rates and lower health outcomes. We have an opportunity to dismantle disproportionate access, and restructure what value is placed on healthcare services. If access to comprehensive care is open and barrier-free, patients can better focus on their health and other important needs. For someone who is homeless in a shelter and covered by Medicaid, a doctor's appointment is not as simple as a 30-60 minute detour from your day. This likely means several hours of traveling and waiting, to be seen quickly and impersonally, while also considering transportation, and other appointments and priorities. This is not to say there are not medical providers and even managed care organizations that truly do care and provide competent, comprehensive, and respectful care, we work with several at BOOM!Health. But until that is the absolute standard to which every New Yorker has access, we will continue to see health disparities that disproportionately impact communities with the highest need for comprehensive healthcare.

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