

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota

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April 22, 2020

Dear members of the Minnesota Congressional delegation,

We find ourselves amid extraordinary circumstances throughout Minnesota and across the health care system. Our health professionals are working tirelessly on the front lines to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, and across the state families are staying home and businesses have closed in order to do their part to “flatten the curve.”

I am writing to provide a comprehensive view of the many ways Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota is supporting our members, our providers, our employees and our communities during this time. Furthermore, as we navigate the pandemic’s many challenges together, I am sharing our recommended next steps to assure people are able to maintain their health insurance coverage and health plans continue to have the resources necessary to meet the needs of our members and the community.

Supporting our members

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota is the leading health plan in Minnesota, covering nearly 2.6 million members across the state. Our top priority remains the health and safety of our members. In this uncertain time, Blue Cross is taking action to remove barriers to health care and increase financial protection for members. We’ve made the following coverage adjustments to help prevent the spread and impact of COVID-19:

- Blue Cross is covering the full cost of diagnostic testing and in-network treatment related to COVID-19. With no cost to the member, Blue Cross will pay for the appropriate medically necessary diagnostic testing and in-network care — including hospitalization — for our fully-insured employer group, individual and Medicare members. These members will not have any copay, coinsurance or deductible costs for COVID-19 diagnosis or care. Self-insured employers have the flexibility to apply the same no-cost structure.
- Ensuring access to prescription medications by waiving early refill limits on 30-day prescription maintenance medications (consistent with member’s benefit plan) and/or encouraging members to use 90-day mail or retail order if available.
- Increasing formulary flexibility to address medication shortage and access concerns.

Blue Cross also seeks to be a trusted resource during this time. We are regularly updating information on our blog – blog.bluecrossmn.com – and website – bluecrossmn.com/coronavirus – to inform members and customers of the latest on the national impact of COVID-19 and provide counsel on what to do and where to seek care if members come down with symptoms.

As we continue to learn more about the virus, Blue Cross is committed to understanding and addressing the disproportionate impact COVID-19 is having on communities of color and Indigenous communities. We remain committed to delivering value to all our members and taking steps to ensure that all individuals are able to achieve their optimal health regardless of the color of their skin or their place of residence.

Encouraging telehealth services

Blue Cross takes our members’ health and safety seriously, and we have long supported virtual options for medical and behavioral health care. To improve access to quality care during this time, Blue Cross has expanded access to allow our members to see their current health care providers virtually. All virtual care provided through [Doctor On Demand](#) is available at no cost to all Blue Cross members whose

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benefits include coverage for that virtual platform. We are also increasing the types of technology that providers can use remotely, including FaceTime and Skype, as well as expanding the types of services that can be provided via telehealth channels, including behavioral health; physical, occupational and speech therapies; and medication management. These changes are making it easier for our members to continue to see their regular doctor or therapist, while limiting their risk of exposure to COVID-19 and alleviating the strain on provider offices and emergency departments. We're doing our best to navigate the operational impacts of these changes, as members' health and safety remain our top priority.

Partnering with providers

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota is committed to supporting our provider partners through the pandemic. Working together, health plans and providers can protect the health of our communities, and we have been working continuously to support our provider partners and health care workers.

In an effort to assist our valued provider partners with their immediate financial concerns, Blue Cross is accelerating approximately \$80 million in payments to providers for quality and cost standards achieved in 2019. These payments were previously scheduled to take place in the fall. In addition, Blue Cross has advanced payments to providers for achievements made in the innovation and transformation of care. We will continue to work through these issues with providers to ensure our members receive the care they need, now and in the future.

We are adding flexibility where possible so providers can deal with the crisis on the front lines. In partnership with the provider community, Blue Cross has temporarily simplified certain administrative requirements, including waiving all prior authorizations for diagnostic tests and for covered services that are medically necessary and consistent with CDC guidance if diagnosed with COVID-19. In addition, Blue Cross has waived prior authorizations for skilled nursing facilities admissions, home care, and DME for respiratory needs, as well as extended prior authorizations for approved elective procedures. We are also making dedicated clinical staff available to address inquiries related to medical services, ensuring timeliness of responses.

Protecting our employees

At Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, we have taken significant action to protect our employees while maintaining our business operations to serve our members, providers, agents and customers. We are committed to doing our part to slow the pandemic by adjusting business operations. With this in mind, we've implemented a work from home requirement for all employees and contractors who have the capability to do so from March 17 to May 4. We will re-assess return to work based on data and following the guidance from the CDC and Governor Walz. While 98% of our workforce is working virtually, we remain 100% operational.

Blue Cross takes the health of our employees and their families extremely seriously, which is why we have committed to new ways of supporting them during the pandemic. We have expanded emergency leave for employees experiencing COVID-19 respiratory illness — or caring for someone in their household with respiratory illness — to a period of 15 consecutive working days, at their full salary without having to use PTO or "Safe and Sick" time. We have also established an emergency fund, making available \$1000 grants for employees who experience catastrophic financial hardship during this time.

Social impact and community support

The COVID-19 crisis continues to have far-reaching impacts on the lives of all Minnesotans, and has in many areas heightened already existing disparities, with demographic indicators such as race and income once again proving to be the ultimate force multiplier on health inequities in Minnesota communities. As part of our social impact mission, Blue Cross is committed as a responsive and supportive partner in this unprecedented time. We are proud to make \$2.83M available to support the efforts of our community partners, as they work to address immediate needs such as heightened food insecurity and anti-Asian racism in communities throughout Minnesota as a result of this pandemic. Our commitments include:

- \$750K to Second Harvest Heartland's COVID-19 response plan.

- \$750K from the Blue Cross Foundation in Rapid Response funds to support childcare, food security, anti-xenophobia, housing and economic immediate needs related to COVID-19.
- \$100K to the Minnesota Disaster Recovery Fund from the Blue Cross Foundation.
- \$100K from the Blue Cross Foundation to the Headwaters Foundation for Justice - Communities First Fund.
- \$100K to the Coalition of Asian American Leaders from the Blue Cross Foundation to address anti-Asian racism heightened by COVID-19.
- \$75K to the Willmar school district to provide emergency food to families and childcare centers.
- \$25K to the Willmar Area Community Foundation to address broader food insecurity issues.
- \$15K from the Blue Cross Foundation to both Northpoint Health and Wellness and Minneapolis American Indian Center to assist in their emergency food programs.
- Another \$900K in additional funds to support community immediate needs and food security.
- \$2K to Sew Good Goods to cover kits that will provide 2,500 masks.
- \$160k through our MN FoodShare Campaign to go to local food shelves across MN

Minnesotans are eager to step up and help during challenging times. Blue Cross is proud to support our employees and communities through coordinating volunteer efforts to respond to COVID-19. Amid a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) for health professionals, Blue Cross has partnered with Allina Health and North Memorial Hospitals and Clinics, along with several community partners, to launch a statewide network of volunteers to sew and donate masks for doctors, nurses and other medical staff. In addition, we're working with Little Brothers – Friends of the Elderly on a “phone a friend” volunteer initiative to connect employees with elders during this profoundly isolating time.

Looking ahead to meet our members needs

Blue Cross has taken a multifaceted approach toward mitigating the immediate and lasting impacts of COVID-19 in order to support the health care system and our communities. These ongoing efforts reflect our commitment to serving all Minnesotans now and into the future. As we look ahead, this pandemic will continue to create unprecedented uncertainty resulting in substantial financial pressure on our customers' ability to pay premiums and the unknown costs of testing, treatment and vaccines that are rapidly in development. Our reserves are a critical safety net for our members and enable us to serve them responsibly and effectively given the unknowns related to the scope, severity and duration of the pandemic.

Next steps needed by Congress to address COVID-19 crisis

We appreciate the swift work by Congress in passing three COVID-19 response bills. The priority given to hospitals, economic support for business, and financial help to individuals was critical. As lawmakers consider next steps, we urge you to ensure that Americans can maintain their health insurance coverage and that employers have a backstop necessary to protect them through the uncertainty. To that end, we offer several recommendations to be included in the next legislative package:

- **Support for maintaining coverage:** To help employers maintain insurance and support those who have been laid off in maintaining their health benefits, Congress should provide temporary subsidies. Employers should be incented to retain coverage and COBRA assistance should be a priority to help those who have been laid off. For individuals without access to employer coverage, it is important to make coverage more affordable by enhancing ACA advanced premium tax credits and providing financial assistance to those with incomes above 400% of the federal poverty level.
- **Risk mitigation to address ongoing financial uncertainties:** To help minimize the financial uncertainties as a result of the pandemic, Congress should establish a temporary risk mitigation program for 2020 and 2021. Lawmakers should apply the program to the individual, employer, Medicare and Medicaid markets and structure it as excess loss for insured markets and reinsurance

for self-insured groups. This backstop would reduce unknowns about treatment costs and allow employers to focus on their operations as plans emerge to begin reopening the economy.

- **Ensure appropriate antibody testing and reimbursement:** To support rapid deployment of the public health surveillance necessary to reopen the economy, Congress needs to catalyze a national testing strategy. FDA should take immediate steps to prioritize high-quality tests and minimize the risk of low-quality tests in the marketplace by immediately requiring authorization for all COVID-19 serology tests. In addition, Congress should allocate appropriate funding to finance antibody testing for public health purposes (i.e. testing that is not required for COVID-19 diagnostic or treatment purposes).
- **Help for uninsured and vulnerable populations:** Congress should enhance funding to support treatment and testing for those who remain uninsured and provide adequate Medicaid funding to cover costs for COVID-19 patients.

Finally, it is critically important our nation's hospitals have the essential equipment and resources to care for patients infected with COVID-19, which is why we emphatically supported the \$100 billion in emergency federal funding provided in the CARES Act. An assessment of this funding, in addition to other recent actions to advance federal funds to hospitals and providers, should be done quickly to determine if additional federal support is needed for those on the frontlines. We also urge an assessment of needed support for independent practices and rural facilities that may need extra resources at this time.

Again, we thank you for your leadership and for all you are doing to protect Minnesotans during this unparalleled time. We are grateful for the support of our many legislative, regulatory and policymaking partners who have taken steps to support an effective response to the pandemic. We want you to have confidence that Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota is here to protect the health of Minnesotans. We are a trusted advisor and advocate for population health and are actively responding to support our members, our providers, our employees and our communities. We are all in this together.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Craig E. Samitt', written in a cursive style.

Craig E. Samitt, MD, MBA
President and CEO
Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota