



American College of  
Healthcare Executives  
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**BLOG**

## Responding to COVID-19 Challenges as a Safety Net Hospital

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In July, [Norwegian American Hospital](#) in Chicago released its [policy paper](#), “Responding to COVID-19 Challenges as a Safety Net Hospital: Lessons from Norwegian American Hospital in Chicago’s Humboldt Park.” NAH predominantly serves Black and Latino/a populations—groups that have been [hardest hit](#) by the COVID-19 pandemic.

NAH’s President/CEO José R. Sánchez discusses the background behind the policy paper, as well as takeaways for healthcare executives to apply at their own organizations.

### **Why did NAH conduct the study?**

Norwegian American Hospital wanted to highlight its incredible and unique response to the COVID-19 pandemic in a literature piece that could be widely shared. We were confident it would be worthwhile to showcase the hospital’s work and affirm the importance of safety net hospitals in this pandemic. We also wanted to provide valuable recommendations to healthcare policymakers that underscore our experiences and the importance of the lessons learned.

In addition, we needed to focus on our commitment to providing all necessary healthcare services associated with this pandemic. We could only accomplish this by conducting a deep dive into fully understanding our community. Understanding the impact of the pandemic on minorities allowed us to address gaps in services and mitigate the issues discovered on behalf of our community.

**What did you learn from the results that surprised you the most?**

The revelation of widespread disproportionate funding allocated by government entities and scarcity of adequate funding opportunities for many safety net hospitals was quite disappointing. Safety net hospitals serving high percentages of low-income, minority patient populations that have been disproportionately hit by the COVID-19 pandemic need access to adequate funding just as much as larger, wealthier institutions. Despite the unique challenges we encountered, we are still very proud of the extraordinary team effort our clinicians, staff and leadership have put forth to meet the significant healthcare needs of our community.

This pandemic also reconfirmed decades of preexisting neglect and health inequities in underserved communities. Research of COVID-19 death rates associated with this pandemic has revealed that minorities are disproportionately suffering and dying in underserved communities.

**What is most important for other CEOs of hospitals to consider as they balance available resources with treating patients?**

At the forefront is protecting your workforce and ensuring more than adequate inventory of PPE to meet demand. Concurrently, managing the psychological impact and related needs of your workforce is also crucial. In preparation for an anticipated COVID-19 surge this fall, all hospital leaders should be focused and ready to execute a comprehensive surge plan that protects all patients, healthcare personnel and visitors.

**What lessons did you learn from the study that healthcare leaders can apply to their organizations?**

Even during this time of global disruption, continue to provide good leadership, clear guidance and direction. Emphasize the resiliency of your workforce and their efforts in response to an unpredictable situation. Foster teamwork across these efforts.

As we shift away from providing “traditional” healthcare, embrace a new paradigm of delivering innovative healthcare across multiple emerging platforms.

Exercise true leadership through leading by example. I was quite surprised by how many of my colleagues are working from home and are not present on-site to lead their institution. For me, this is unthinkable, especially when so many of our employees demonstrate their commitment to healthcare by coming into the workplace every day.

Lastly, as healthcare leaders, it is fundamentally important to make a significant impact on the world around us through individual and collective advocacy efforts. In order to survive this pandemic, it is imperative that we advocate strongly through our legislators and healthcare policymakers to ensure the needs of all patient populations are met. Effective leadership goes beyond what you accomplish within your institution—you must continually advocate for patients by seeking bold approaches to affect success within the communities we all serve.

<http://blog.ache.org/2020/08/28/responding-to-covid-19-challenges-as-a-safety-net-hospital/>