

## Leveraging health information exchange during a pandemic

### Background

Getting the most current clinical information to where it's needed, when it's needed plays a critical role in the delivery of care and is central to HEALTHeLINK'S mission. As the health information exchange for Western New York and a Qualified Entity (QE) of the Statewide Health Information Network for New York (SHIN-NY), HEALTHeLINK understands the unique role it has in the health care system to securely share clinical information across different providers, hospital systems and health plans. Previous studies have demonstrated that when HEALTHeLINK is fully utilized it results in greater efficiency in the health care setting and better care for patients.

When the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic began to surface in early 2020, HEALTHeLINK was in close contact with county health departments, New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH), and the QEs across New York State that make up the SHIN-NY ready to support epidemiology and surveillance work and other community COVID-19 response efforts.

### HIE Response

Working in partnership with NYSDOH, HEALTHeLINK was able to quickly stand up several services related to COVID-19 that continue to actively be utilized. Through the NYSDOH Electronic Clinical Lab Reporting System, all COVID-19 lab tests performed in the region are available via the HEALTHeLINK patient record look up functionality.

From March 2020 through June 2020, the utilization of HEALTHeLINK'S patient record lookup functionality by the county and state health departments more than doubled. In addition, the number of public health users who were securely accessing the HIE nearly doubled.

HEALTHeLINK participants also can receive alert notifications for their patients who had a COVID-19 test conducted. This includes both positive and negative results. As part of the New York State emergency declaration, the requirement for patient consent for delivery of specific COVID-19 lab results to providers who have a treating relationship with the patient has currently been waived.

This functionality has been utilized by physician practices, hospitals, health plans and health homes. From March 2020 through June 2020, more than 620,000 alert notifications for both positive and negative lab results were delivered to HEALTHeLINK participants.

As part of the ongoing response to COVID-19, New York State declared a public health emergency. This declaration included the expansion of availability of telehealth services for patients to reduce the risk of disease transmission. To help facilitate and support this approach, NYSDOH allowed informed, verbal consent for telehealth visits in lieu of the current written consent requirements.

In addition to providing these services to participants, the HEALTHeLINK's analytics team is working to develop COVID-19 and surveillance dashboards. The information ultimately collected will help to determine more and better ways to support the various modeling and reporting efforts based on the data infrastructure which continues to be built within the health information exchange.

## **Conclusion**

Health information exchange has played an important role in flattening the curve and in supporting the hospital systems' flex and surge strategy, demonstrating the efficacy of health information technology. It has also enabled the continuity of care throughout the pandemic as providers have patient health information in real time at the point of care including virtual visits via telehealth methods.

The information collected now will help to determine more and better ways to support the various modeling and reporting efforts based on the data infrastructure being processed within the HIE. These models and the lessons learned now will be vital to help predict health outcomes for the coronavirus pandemic now and other types of health crises that may occur in the future.

## **About HEALTHeLINK**

HEALTHeLINK is a collaboration among hospitals, physicians, health plans and other health care providers in the eight counties of western New York State to securely exchange clinical information to improve the quality of care, enhance patient safety and mitigate health care costs. HEALTHeLINK is a Qualified Entity of the Statewide Health Information Network for New York (SHIN-NY), which enables providers to access their patients' data from across the state. HEALTHeLINK is also a founding member of the Strategic Health Information Exchange Collaborative (SHIEC), the national trade association of health information exchanges. For more information about HEALTHeLINK, visit [wnyhealthelink.com](http://wnyhealthelink.com).