Returning to Work Safely: How Virtual COVID-19 Programs Can Help

Businesses and organizations everywhere are adjusting to life in a world with COVID-19. With more than 26 million Americans unemployed as of June 2020, workplaces of all kinds are facing tremendous pressure and anxiety around how to reopen and when.

Several states have begun rolling out phased reopening plans, but the process of reopening is not easy — it is complex and will require careful thought and consideration every step of the way. For everyone to return to work safely in the United States, protocols must be established and followed, and with COVID-19 testing remaining top of mind for patients, providers, and employers, health systems are uniquely positioned to lead the way forward.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many healthcare organizations have quickly evolved and expanded their telehealth efforts. Establishing virtual care programs has allowed health systems to ramp up triage and testing capabilities, as well as protect their own employees from infection. Since these institutions have already experienced how to get their employees back to work as quickly and safely as possible, they have essentially created a roadmap that will help other organizations looking to reopen safely and effectively.

Here's a look at how Ochsner Health in Louisiana is leveraging virtual programs to help local employer groups return to work safely.

Partnering with Local Employer Groups on "Safe to Return" Programs

Ochsner Health is Louisiana's largest non-profit, academic, healthcare system, comprising over 26,000 employees and over 4,500 employed and affiliated physicians in over 90 medical specialties and subspecialties. The health system provides coordinated inpatient and outpatient care across 40 owned, managed, and affiliated hospitals and specialty hospitals, and more than 100 health centers and urgent care centers. It is also one of the largest non-university-based physician training centers in the United States.

Ochsner Health heavily integrated telehealth into its COVID-19 response. Ochsner Health quickly converted four urgent care clinics into completely virtual COVID-19 clinics. Utilizing its own provider network in Louisiana and the Gulf South states, Ochsner Health was able to train hundreds of providers on virtual visits so they could leverage Ochsner's telehealth app, Ochsner Anywhere Care, for patient care. Since March, the health system has completed over 150,000 virtual visits.
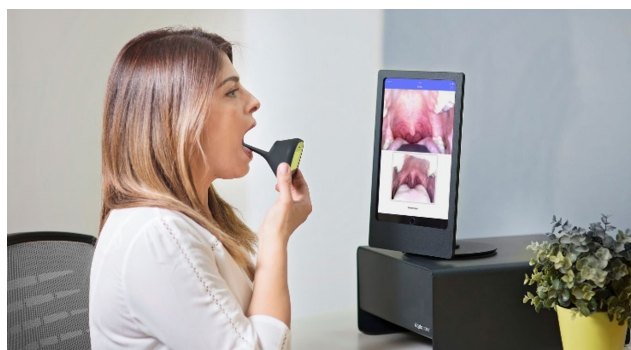
Leveraging Telehealth Expertise to Support Employers

As Ochsner Health prepared for the reopening date in the region, it realized the community may need help reintegrating safely. The organization developed a program for employers, known as Safe to Return, that empowers employer groups to feel comfortable and confident about bringing employees back to work and interacting with the community again.

Ochsner Virtual Employer Clinic

The Safe to Return program leverages both in-person and virtual components to help address the challenges employers will likely face moving forward. It focuses on the following areas:

- **In-Person Screening Stations:** Ochsner has screening stations that will be used to conduct temperature checks for all employers entering the building. In addition to temperature checks, these in-person screenings can also include COVID-19 testing and screening.

- **Virtual Screening Rooms:** Employers can leverage a virtual screening room like what you would see in one of Ochsner's urgent care centers. The room includes an iPad that is connected to the Ochsner Anywhere Care app, powered by Amwell, as well as TytoCare home kit for diagnostic testing.

- **Prescription Delivery:** Through Ochsner Anywhere Care, the health system also offers same day prescription delivery to the office, which helps minimize the risk of exposure by keeping employees out of pharmacies and doctor offices.

- **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):** Ochsner provides PPE at all screening stations.

- **Sanitizer:** Hand sanitizer and sanitizing wipes are placed in all employer common areas to promote personal safety.

- **Communication:** Employers have access to readymade on-site signage and external communications to help educate and inform employees.

More than 70 local employers are already leveraging Ochsner's virtual employer clinics to help transition employees back to work. The health system's goal is to continue to support employer groups in help minimizing the risk of exposure to COVID-19 and ensure everyone can work safely in the "new normal."

Virtual Care Is A Key Part of Returning to Work — and the Future of Medicine

Ochsner Health is a perfect example of how health systems can use telehealth and virtual care programs to help employers return to work safely. As virtual care continues to play a key role in reopening plans for communities, health systems should continue to engage and educate local employers on how they can best partner to ensure a smooth return to work process.

As Ryan Pattison, Director of Consumer Telehealth at Ochsner, says of virtual care and telemedicine, "This is the new normal of healthcare — making sure we support our providers and give our consumers a very easy platform to drop into and see a provider … Moving forward, that is the best way we'll be able to control infection. We're going to heed that call."