

Preliminary Key Points from Open-Ended Survey Question Responses

HCA Covid-19 Survey 4/12 to 4/26

All quotes are paraphrased

Access to Care

Vermonters expressed high levels of anxiety about the current situation and the future. People are concerned about their well-being, about the well-being of others, and about our health care system.

Many Vermonters described concerns about access to care, including routine/preventive care, health maintenance services and activities, dental care, eye care, physical therapy, specialists, imaging, surgeries, procedures, and medication. A number of Vermonters described being in pain due to lack of access to clinics and delay of needed orthopedic surgeries.

People are worried about cancelled appointments and services, and are wondering when things will be rescheduled, what the backlog will be like, and what the immediate and long term risks will be of delaying care.

Vermonters are having difficulty navigating when to access care. There is fear, anxiety, confusion, and uncertainty about going to the hospital and to provider offices. People used words like “hesitation,” “hard to decide,” “scary,” and “uncomfortable” to describe accessing care they need.

Numerous people expressed concern about “bothering” their providers or “burdening” the health care system during this time. Confidence in health care availability ranged from “other medical issues don’t matter now” to “I’m confident that care would be available if needed.”

Vermonters are also very concerned about accessing their medications, including worry about going into pharmacies (lack of drive-through and curbside pick-up), needing to take multiple trips to the pharmacy, having trouble getting enough medicine and supplies, and worry about future shortages.

Vermonters expressed a range of opinions on telemedicine, including positive experiences (“life-saver”), importance for access to mental health services, desire for continuing access to telemedicine; more neutral feedback (“at least we have”); and concerns about its sufficiency (relying on phone check-ins is “very scary”). Vermonters shared concerns about access to telemedicine services including poor internet connection, lack of devices or old devices (“do not own a cell phone,” “no coverage in my area,” “no video on old computer”), inability to use technology due to disability or age, loss of access to out of state providers, and challenges of completing mental health appointments with children or other family members present. People also noted that accommodations providers are making to support patients remotely “should always be available.”

Some Vermonters who described the above access concerns also described concerns about and actual experiences of ending up in the emergency department. These concerns include worry about the emergency itself, worry about exposure to COVID-19 in the ED, and worry/experience of ED bills when provider offices are unavailable (see responses to Question 2 below).

Vermonters also expressed a lot of gratitude to their providers (doctors, visiting nurses, hospice) and health care and other essential workers, and expressed a desire for more resources to support these workers.

Affordability

Numerous Vermonters reported economic challenges as well as concerns about health care and health insurance costs. People reported needing the stimulus money for health care and other basic needs (glasses, food, heating oil) and worrying about themselves and their families “making ends meet.”

Vermonters with and without insurance reported that they “can’t afford to get sick,” and expressed frustration at health care costs. Many cited the challenges of high-deductible plans, stating that if they need medical care they “will not be able to afford it,” or that they “can’t get health care” because of the costs. People described the trade-off between paying for premiums and paying for care, such as having to choose between “paying insurance premiums and going to the doctor.” Others expressed that they are worried about needing care and not having health insurance, “but it’s not affordable.”

Some Vermonters specifically reported being unable to afford health insurance premiums. For example, people described premiums as “hugely expensive,” “not affordable,” and “high.” Vermonters also described being “very worried” about 2021 premium and cost-sharing increases for 2021, with statements like “if it goes up substantially there's no way we can afford it.”

Vermonters also noted the challenges that self-employed people face in affording health insurance and care, for example describing the health care and insurance system as “unworkable” for self-employed people.

Vermonters described difficulty paying medical bills, as well as fear about future bills if they were to need care. Some specifically described the challenge of paying for emergency department services, and noted that the ED is currently their only option for getting care. People expressed that they “should not have to pay ED bills” if their doctors direct them to get care at the ED, or if the provider is unavailable. Vermonters described their inability to afford both current and future health care bills, and fear and anxiety about being able to get the care they need.

Vermonters also provided general feedback on the health care and insurance systems, for example expressing that “we need universal health care” and wishing “everyone had reliable health insurance.”

Isolation

Many Vermonters described the challenges and effects of isolation (cabin fever has “taken on a whole new depth”). People described loneliness, negative mental health effects of social isolation, boredom, “difficulty managing”, need for physical contact with loved ones, and family conflict. Vermonters also described coping strategies including physical activity, talking to friends and others, “keeping busy”, meditation, contributing to the community, and reliance on pets.

Government Response

Vermonters shared varying opinions on the state and federal government response to COVID-19 and the guidance and information they received. Numerous people expressed a need or desire for increased testing, and wished to know if they had had COVID-19 and/or if they are immune. Some people were confused by “changing,” “confusing,” or “unclear” state guidance. Others praised the state response. People expressed a range of opinions on the stay-at-home order from “need to keep more people at home” to “doing more harm than good.”

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