May 19, 2020: COVID-19 Testing

Speakers:

✓ Dan Derksen, University of Arizona Center for Rural Health Director
✓ Dr. Kevin Stephan, Epidemiologist with Nod Specialists
✓ Dave Voepel, Executive Director of AZ Health Care Association

In May’s Community and Legislative Partners in Aging meeting representatives from University of Arizona, Arizona Health Care Association, Nod (Medical) Specialists and the Arizona Health Care Association discussed the statewide testing of health professionals and first responders, telemedicine, delivery of care initiatives and staffing and equipment deficits related to this epidemic.

Our Zoom discussion started with an announcement from the Governor’s office that the state is partnering with the University of Arizona Center for Rural Health (AzCRH) to administer 250,000 antibody tests to health professionals and first responders. AzCRH will be tracking the results to learn more about community exposure, assist in making decisions about how to protect our citizens and help “create a roadmap to recovery.” There are current 30 participating cities and 10,000 scheduled tests. The State will provide $3.5 million dollars for this antibody screening.

AzCRH Director Dan Derksen also discussed the differences between the types of tests and their veracity. He stated that both the diagnostic PCR (nasal swab) test for current infection and the blood test for antibodies are improving as far as accuracy. But it is still hard for both doctors and lay people to keep up with the most current information.

Dr. Kevin Stephen addressed the evolution and effectiveness of telemedicine. He spoke about doctor office visit challenges such as long wait times in the lobby or exam room and the fear of cross contamination. So – telemedicine! Dr. Stephen did acknowledge computer availability and technology challenges for some seniors. Phone calls with a doctor are also available, but he acknowledged that a large percentage of communication is non-verbal, so a visual meeting is best.

Dave Voepel from the AZ Health Care Association echoed the state’s health care and first responder testing initiative goals and stated that both types of testing testing could be widely available in senior care facilities
soon. As he stated last month’s meeting, senior care facilities struggle to maintain permanent staffing during this epidemic as well as acquiring sufficient PPE and testing materials. COVID-19 spreads quickly within care facilities, with Dementia and Alzheimer’s patients especially vulnerable. Staff must be hyper-aware of evolving symptoms and isolate immediately to prevent “super infections.” Adequate and consistent testing is essential. But there are challenges to testing in care facilities. Residents, or their legal advocates, must give permission for testing. Also, insurance may not pay for the test.

To meet the caregiver shortage in Arizona, Governor Ducey signed an executive order last month allowing on-the-job training for caregiver certification. This order allows potential caregivers to complete 62 hours of supervised training in a paid work environment, before taking the Arizona Board of Nursing Care examination to become certified. The Governor’s office promotes this as economic stimulus, offering a career change to those who may have been laid off during the shut-down. Not everyone agrees with this executive order, statements from the CEO of Pima Medical Institute and VP for health initiatives for Pima Council on Aging agree that while the executive order isn’t ideal (as it circumvents classroom training), it’s needed to fill entry-level caregiver positions at a crucial time.

Upcoming Meetings:


References:

University of Arizona Center for Rural Health - https://crh.arizona.edu/

University of Arizona Covid-19 Antibody Testing FAQs - https://covid19antibodytesting.arizona.edu/

Nod Specialists - https://www.nodmd.com/

Tucson Business, Caregivers Can Received On-the-Job Training After Governor’s Order - https://www.insidetucsonbusiness.com/business/caregivers-can-receive-on-the-job-training-after-governors-order/article_2a4e0fbe-8e2b-11ea-95b4-672bcb5b7b56.html