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How Visiting Nurse Services in Westchester is taking personal safety to the next level

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Plus:

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About a year ago, Timothy Leddy, president and CEO of Visiting Nurse Services in Westchester, saw a technology company on LinkedIn that piqued his interest. The Peace of Mind Co. was looking to expand the use of its POM personal safety devices from college campuses to health care settings. Leddy wanted to help home care workers feel safer on the job.

To meet both objectives, Leddy and POM Co-Founder and President Andrew Leahy forged a connection. This year VNS Westchester became the first home care provider to try out the POM device.

Now, after wrapping up the pilot program with 25 home care workers, VNS Westchester told *Crain's*, it is planning to offer the device to all its field-based staff: more than 200 workers. The organization also is working on rolling out the device as an employee benefit for non-field-based staff and family members.

The device is about the size of a half dollar, making it more discreet than a mobile phone. It can be attached to a lanyard, a nursing or therapy bag, or a key chain. With three taps, it connects the user to a dispatcher, who can view the user's location and profile. The dispatcher can send emergency services to the user if necessary.

"It's a virtual escort for traveling places, from Dutchess County and upstate all the way to the Bronx," Leddy said. "We decided this coming January to offer it to all field-based staff free of charge."

One reason for the interest, Leddy said, is that home care visits are often "not what they used to be." Patients sometimes are discharged sicker, he said, and home care workers might be traveling a half-hour between visits.

According to a 2015 study published in the journal *BMC Public Health*, studies have found that **between 5% and 61%** of home care workers have experienced some form of workplace violence.

Offering the POM device "shows the staff that we take their safety as priority," Leddy said. "We're hoping a majority of staff take advantage of" the benefit.

Leahy said VNS Westchester was "the first health care provider that we spoke to that was very interested in providing these safety devices for home care. It made sense as I came to understand the way [Leddy] runs his organization. He thinks outside the box."

For home care workers, "their workplace is the home of the patient—inside other peoples' residences," Leahy said, unlike in a hospital, where there would be security personnel and a camera at every turn.

From the first meeting with the clinical leadership team at VNS Westchester, "everyone had a story about feeling uneasy either in a home or in an unfamiliar neighborhood," Leahy said.

Customized features for the line of work include mobile check-ins and checkouts for appointments with nurse managers.

Leahy and Leddy declined to provide their arrangement's financial terms, but Leahy said that, in general, customers pay for the device, plus a monthly service fee. The company currently has about a dozen health care customers including VNS Westchester.

"Overall the feedback [from the VNS pilot program] was really positive," Leahy said. "We are thrilled that they're going to move forward with this for everyone next year."

Krzysztof Dragan, a registered nurse at VNS Westchester, told *Crain's*, "I'm fortunate that I haven't had to use the POM yet, but having it on my key chain gives me tremendous peace of mind at all times—during and after work hours.

"Home care can be an unpredictable environment," Dragan said. "You don't know what you'll find when you walk through the door of a patient's home, by yourself, in terms of the behavior of patients, family members or others who may be present.

"The POM is like a Life Alert button for the home care worker," Dragan added. "I know I can push a button and help will be on the way."

The Home Care Association of New York State said it's important to have safety measures in place.

"With emerging technologies, providers have a greater variety of tools at their disposal for staff safety," Celisia Street, director of education at the association, said in a statement provided to *Crain's*. "HCA is eager to share VNS Westchester's program, along with others, at the national level as part of the Blueprint for Excellence initiative led by ElevatingHome and the Visiting Nurse Associations of America." —Jennifer Henderson

Insurers urge Cuomo to sign out-of-network-hospital bill

The state Health Plan Association is pushing Gov. Andrew Cuomo to sign a package of bills that would allow insurers and consumers to dispute medical charges after an emergency visit to an out-of-network hospital.

The charges would then be reviewed by an independent arbitrator, who would decide whether the insurer's payment or the hospital's charge is more reasonable. It would be an extension of a process already in place for physicians' charges.

"The current independent dispute resolution process has worked well, ensuring that reimbursements for emergency services are fair and reasonable while holding individuals harmless," Eric Linzer, president and CEO of the state Health Plan Association, said in a statement.

The legislation [was passed](#) by the state Senate and Assembly in June and was delivered to the governor Oct. 11.

An amendment to the bill specified that insurers must pay at least 25% more for out-of-network services than they would for in-network care in response to concerns from hospitals that the legislation would coerce facilities into joining insurance networks.

The bill exempts hospitals from the arbitration process if at least 60% of their discharges are Medicaid beneficiaries, uninsured patients or patients dually eligible for Medicare and Medicaid.

If signed into law, the new policies would go into effect Jan. 1. —Jonathan LaMantia

Physicians fear a new prescription drug crisis, study finds

More than half of primary care physicians—62%—are concerned that the opioid epidemic will give way to a new prescription-drug crisis, according to a [study](#) from Quest Diagnostics of Secaucus, N.J., and the Manhattan-based Center on Addiction.

The study also found that 72% of physicians fear that patients being treated for chronic pain will seek out illicit drugs should they be denied access to prescription opioids. And about 70% of physicians said they wished they had more training on transitioning patients off opioids.

Physicians might be overconfident in their ability to recognize patients' misuse of prescription drugs, the study indicated: Although 72% of doctors said they trust their patients to take medications as prescribed, a little more than half of patients misused prescription drugs.

"The results of this national survey, combined with Quest's data, confirm the need to ensure physicians are equipped to recognize and treat addiction among their patients," Creighton Drury, the Center on Addiction's chief executive, said in a statement.

The study pointed to a new source of misuse: The drug gabapentin, which is emerging as a popular alternative to opioids for treating pain. Data show a 40% increase in non-prescribed gabapentin misuse during the past year.

"A vast majority of physicians recognize the need for more tools to prevent opioid drug misuse and substance use disorders, and that is why many are tightening opioid prescribing and turning to gabapentin as an alternative," Dr. Jeffrey Gudin of Quest, co-author of the study, said in a statement. "While gabapentin may not have opioids' addictive potential, it can exaggerate euphoric effects when combined with opioids or anxiety medications." —J.H.

Fidelis Care expands retail presence

Fidelis Care, which offers insurance products in all 62 New York counties, is adding more physical locations where members and prospective members can receive information about their insurance coverage.

The insurer has opened three storefront offices in the past month in Bensonhurst and Sunset Park, Brooklyn, and in Poughkeepsie, bringing its total to 24 statewide. It debuted an office in the Inwood section of Manhattan within the past year.

Fidelis' products include Medicaid, Medicare Advantage and Qualified Health Plan products as well as other state insurance options.

Insurers have used the stores as both marketing tools to attract people interested in getting coverage and as customer service hubs to help resolve members' issues.

Fidelis, which is [part of Centene](#) has about 1.7 million members, uses the locations to help answer members' questions about their benefits and to help them renew coverage.

The offices are staffed by people who can communicate in languages that are spoken in the community. In the Bensonhurst office that includes Mandarin, Russian and Spanish.

Health care is "a confusing topic," said Scott Averill, Fidelis' vice president of sales and marketing. "As the industry gets more complex, people are looking for that face-to-face interaction."

Fidelis also has used the locations to administer flu shots and offer health education classes led by its medical directors.

EmblemHealth is among the other insurers that have operated retail locations. It used them to offer fitness and stress management classes.

The storefront offices are open to members and nonmembers.

Fidelis said it recorded about 176,000 walk-ins at its locations from September 2018 to last month.

"One of our main values is to make sure people get coverage, first and foremost," Averill said. "Of course we want them to pick Fidelis, but before they walk out the door we want them to have coverage." —J.L.

AT A GLANCE

HOSPITAL THEFT: State Attorney General Letitia James on Wednesday announced the sentencing of Wendell Lewis, 32, of Brooklyn, for stealing more than \$500,000 from two hospital systems: Interfaith Medical Center and New York-Presbyterian Brooklyn Methodist Hospital. Lewis, who pleaded guilty, received a sentence of 36 months to five years in state prison.

CANCER STUDIES: The state Department of Health [will hold meetings](#) around New York, including on Staten Island and in Suffolk County, to share the findings of several regional studies investigating above average cancer incidence. The Staten Island and Suffolk County meetings will be held on Oct. 29 at the College of Staten Island and on Nov. 12 at Stony Brook University, respectively.

OSCAR LAWSUIT: Oscar Health is appealing a federal court ruling in Florida that dismissed its case against Florida Blue, [the Orlando Sentinel reported](#). Oscar has alleged that Florida Blue engaged in anti-competitive practices by forging exclusivity agreements with insurance brokers.

OPIOID SETTLEMENTS: Five drugmakers and distributors—AmerisourceBergen Corp., Cardinal Health, Johnson & Johnson, McKesson and Teva Pharmaceuticals—are offering about \$50 billion combined in cash, drugs and services to settle thousands of lawsuits filed by state and local governments over the companies' role in the opioid crisis, [Reuters reported](#).

SURPRISE BILLS: The House Ways and Means Committee has thus far failed to come to an agreement on how to address surprise bills, with the committee's top Republican rejecting Democratic Rep. Richard Neal's proposal that would direct administrative agencies and health care industry groups to devise a way to determine how much physicians and hospitals should be paid, [The Hill reported](#). The Greater New York Hospital Association has lobbied against the use of regional benchmarks to set prices.

GENERIC DRUGS: The U.S. Food and Drug Administration said Wednesday that it approved 1,171 generic drugs in fiscal year 2019—an all-time record. "Lower drug prices are an important part of delivering American patients the affordability they need," Secretary Alex Azar of the Department of Health and Human Services, said in a statement.

Inline Play

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