

Quick-Takes for Medicaid Leaders Amid COVID-19: What's Next?

By Ed O'Neil, PhD, MPA

Over the past few months the [Quick-Takes](#) series has focused on the immediate response to the COVID-19 driven crisis. We now have a better sense that we may be at this for another half year or more. And even when some of the dire elements of today begin to abate, we will not find ourselves returning to “normal.” Now is the time to take stock of what we have learned and how we have changed. It is also important for leaders to position their teams and organizations to be ready for a longer run, the new problems that will emerge, and the opportunities the shifts in our lives have afforded.

What we've learned — Your list will be different than mine, but it's time to get your team engaged in this discussion and uncover as many lessons as you can.

- 1. We can do different** — We were challenged to rapidly take stock of core function and activity and then pump it out in a number of the most novel ways, from online conferences to at-home school to curbside pickup and Zoom dates. Now we need to think what is better this way? What was not even possible without these changes? And, what do we want to keep?
- 2. We can do it fast** — How long would all of this innovation have taken in “normal” times? Beyond the crisis, what made us move so fast? Was it a new depth of cooperation? Did we all own the new direction because it was existential? Could we rise above ourselves to run faster together? Now is the time to take stock of those things, give them a name, hold them up, and add them to our list of values.
- 3. We can make do** — During the past eight months we made do with what we had, from technology to Kleenex — and there has often been less of everything. And we made it through. How did we do it? What did we cut out? What did we think was essential that turned out to be peripheral?
- 4. We can be called to a higher purpose** — We did get down to basics, but time and time again I've been struck by hard work, innovation, and sacrifice that has been driven because our work has taken on higher purposes, from preserving access to care to reducing the inequities exposed in our health care systems.

About the Quick-Takes Series

This miniseries, part of the [Medicaid Leadership Exchange podcast](#), provides guidance to help Medicaid leaders during the COVID-19 crisis. The series, which includes companion videos and tip sheets, is developed in partnership with the National Association of Medicaid Directors and the Center for Health Care Strategies through support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. For more information, visit www.chcs.org/quicktakes.

Articulating this for our teams and ensuring an ongoing commitment to such purposeful work will go a long way in the coming months and years.

Shifting Gears — What we do over the months remaining in this calendar year will be important for how successfully we take full advantage of the things we have learned. They require action now.

- 1. Capture the learning** — The categories above will vary from place to place and leader to leader, but now is the time to set a small, creative, diverse team to the charge of identifying, capturing, evaluating, and broadening the discussion throughout the organization of what has been learned. This undertaking will need to have visibility and legitimacy from top leadership. Its work should lead to specific plans as to what to keep and how, what to drop and why, and what to grow and how this makes the future better.
- 2. Learning about learning** — A special category in these observations and actions should be how your organization, unit, or team learned to respond. These qualities are a rich capital for making the investments in the reinvention of organizations that will be absolutely necessary as we continue to respond, make do with tighter budgets, create new things that are vital, and reposition ourselves and our organizations for the new world. There will be no going back and knowing what these new realities are, how we have mastered them, and how we can translate them into tools we use daily is vital.
- 3. Next gen switch** — Many of those who have stepped up to the challenges are some of the newest in our organizations. Because of their skills, orientations, lack of bias, and not knowing any better, they have seen this less as a disaster and more as a problem to solve. And, they have far more stake in the future than the Boomers and even younger that have led. Before the crisis I heard a lot anxiety of who was going to take over — in many cases, they now have done so without a revolution or things falling apart. It is now time for the incumbents to push this change with gusto, courage, and trust.

Seeing the majority of 2020 in its value — not as a tragedy — and then translating lessons gleaned into action is the essential role for leadership now.

About Ed O'Neil

Ed O'Neil, PhD, MPA, is the owner of O'Neil & Associates, a management consulting and leadership development firm focused on change and renewal in the health care system. He was previously professor in the Departments of Family and Community Medicine, Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of California, San Francisco, and director of the Center for the Health Professions, a training institute that he created in 1992. His work across three decades has focused on changing the US health care system through improved policy and leadership. To learn more, visit www.oneil-and-associates.com.

About the National Association of Medicaid Directors

The National Association of Medicaid Directors supports Medicaid directors in administering the program in cost-effective, efficient, and visionary ways that enable the over 70 million Americans served by Medicaid to achieve their best health and to thrive in their communities. To learn more, visit www.medicaiddirectors.org.

About the Medicaid Leadership Institute

The *Medicaid Leadership Institute*, an initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation led by the Center for Health Care Strategies, helps Medicaid directors develop the skills and expertise necessary to successfully lead their state programs in an ever-changing policy environment. To learn more, visit www.chcs.org/medicaid-leaders.