

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HOME HEALTH AND HOME CARE IN MASSACHUSETTS

UMass Lowell Safe Home Care Project  
Betsy Lehman Center for Patient Safety

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SAFE HOME  
CARE PROJECT

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tens of thousands of Massachusetts residents depend on home care to support their health and well-being as they age or manage disabilities. But many of the services they need, such as help with mobility or personal hygiene, require close physical contact — a known contributor to the transmission of COVID-19. A survey of home care agencies highlights the need to better equip this vital segment of the state’s health care industry to prevent spread of the virus among its workers, the vulnerable residents for whom they care, and their families.

The **Safe Home Care Project at the University of Massachusetts Lowell and the Betsy Lehman Center for Patient Safety** surveyed a representative sample of Massachusetts home care agencies to assess the impact of COVID-19 in the early phase of the pandemic, March-June, 2020.

The findings highlight that home care agencies and members of their workforce face challenges to safely providing services while protecting themselves from COVID-19. Specifically:

- COVID-19 exposure is a major concern for home care workers, clients and agency managers.
- These concerns are justified, as a majority of agencies reported having workers and clients who tested positive or were symptomatic.
- Provisioning staff with PPE is both a top priority and a challenge for agencies.
- Guidance and policies to protect against COVID-19 are difficult to interpret and apply to the home care environment.
- Inconsistent communication about COVID-19 exposure compromises prevention and safety efforts.

These findings, coupled with the expectation that COVID-19 will continue to circulate, underscore the need to act now to sustain the safety of home care services and protect both workers and clients.

State efforts to stem the spread of COVID-19 should account for the key role of home care in the health care, disability and elder care systems by:

- Providing a framework for practice guidance — and securing resources — to prevent infection spread among workers and clients.

- Affording home care agencies and workers the same consideration as other frontline health care organizations and workers caring for people during the pandemic with respect to:
  - Actionable information about COVID-19 infection status of clients
  - Access to and funding for PPE and disinfection supplies
  - Robust training on proper use of PPE including effective fit testing of N95s
  - Access to timely, free COVID-19 testing upon occupational exposure or development of symptoms
  - Informational resources on COVID-19 policies relevant to the home care setting
  - Emergency childcare, paid sick leave and “hazard pay”

COVID-19 may well be exacerbating long-standing challenges in the home care sector, including inadequate insurance reimbursement for services and living wages for workers, which will need to be addressed to ensure access to these critical services for Massachusetts residents during the pandemic and beyond.

## HOME CARE IN MASSACHUSETTS

Many older adults and persons with disabilities live with chronic conditions and associated complex medical and personal care needs. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 65-year-olds have about a 70% chance of needing some form of long-term care services in their remaining years.<sup>1</sup> Home health and home care are often preferable and more cost effective alternatives to hospitals, rehabilitation facilities, nursing homes and other institutional settings.

Nationwide, home care is among the fastest growing industries.<sup>2</sup> Massachusetts reflects this trend with a robust home care industry that supports the health and well-being of over 60,000 disabled and elderly clients<sup>3</sup> with diverse racial, ethnic and socioeconomic characteristics.

Home care aides comprise the largest part of the home care workforce and these jobs are among the fastest growing occupations in the U.S.<sup>4</sup> These workers may also be socially and economically vulnerable. Members of the home care workforce are largely female (over 80%), racially and ethnically diverse, have low and unpredictable income, and often rely on public assistance programs.<sup>5,6</sup>

Home care aides can serve a variety of roles. Aides assist with activities of daily living such as dressing, personal hygiene, feeding and ambulation. They may also provide other support such as cleaning and disinfecting surfaces, grocery shopping, meal preparation, housekeeping and help with simple exercises. Specially trained home health aides may perform certain clinical tasks under appropriate supervision.

As Massachusetts experienced growing spread of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020, these workers served an important role. Yet, the services they offer are not without risk for both the aide and client as they require close physical contact. Although home care aides are

considered essential workers, the potential direct exposure to COVID-19 among members of the workforce may have not been fully appreciated and addressed.

Recognizing the integral role home care plays in the delivery of health and social services, the Safe Home Care Project at University of Massachusetts Lowell and the Betsy Lehman Center for Patient Safety conducted a survey of Massachusetts home care agencies to assess the impact of COVID-19 during the early phase of the pandemic on home care agencies and aides.

### ABOUT THE SURVEY<sup>7</sup>

The online survey was designed to assess COVID-19 impacts from March – June, 2020. The survey was distributed to 274 agency directors comprising a representative subset of Massachusetts agencies through industry associations and the state’s Aging Services Access Points.

One manager per agency was asked to complete the survey. The survey was open between June 1 and June 30, 2020. Two reminder emails were sent one week apart.

The survey was anonymous. Any question could be skipped so denominators vary between questions. The survey took respondents 15-20 minutes to complete.

116 surveys were returned (42% response rate). The statistical analyses were performed using 94 surveys with nearly complete responses from agencies employing more than 14,000 aides and providing care to nearly 47,000 clients.

### Home care aides can serve a variety of roles

Activities of daily living	Other support	Clinical tasks (if trained)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dressing</li> <li>• Personal hygiene</li> <li>• Feeding</li> <li>• Ambulation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cleaning and disinfecting surfaces</li> <li>• Grocery shopping</li> <li>• Meal preparation</li> <li>• Housekeeping</li> <li>• Help with simple exercises</li> </ul>	

A note about the terminology: For brevity, this report uses the term “home care” to encompass both medical and non-medical services in private homes and refers to care recipients as “clients,” though terms such as “consumer” and “patient” are also commonly used. In this report, the term “home care aide” refers to all aides hired via home care agencies, including home health aides, home care aides, and supportive services workers.

## **FINDING:** COVID-19 exposure is a significant concern for home care workers, clients and management

Exposure to COVID-19 is a top worry for both aides and their clients — and the data indicate that it is a real risk. The very nature of the work — interacting in close proximity with people who need help with dressing, bathing, oral care, and more — puts workers and clients at increased risk of infection.

During the first months of the pandemic, delivery of home care services declined due to worries about exposure to the virus. 94% percent of Massachusetts home care agency managers surveyed said that exposure to COVID-19 is the leading concern voiced by clients and families about using home care services. For eight out of 10 respondents, client hours declined after the pandemic began, with 99% of managers citing clients' unwillingness to have aides come into homes for fear of COVID-19 exposure as the reason for the decline. 65% said that client family members were assuming aide responsibilities.

Agency managers also hear concerns about potential exposure to the virus from their staff. 95% of respondents say that their workers' main concern is the risk of contracting COVID-19 during home visits. Among managers who report a decline in client hours, nearly three-quarters (74%) also say that at least some of the aides they employ are too worried about exposure to the virus to work in clients' homes.

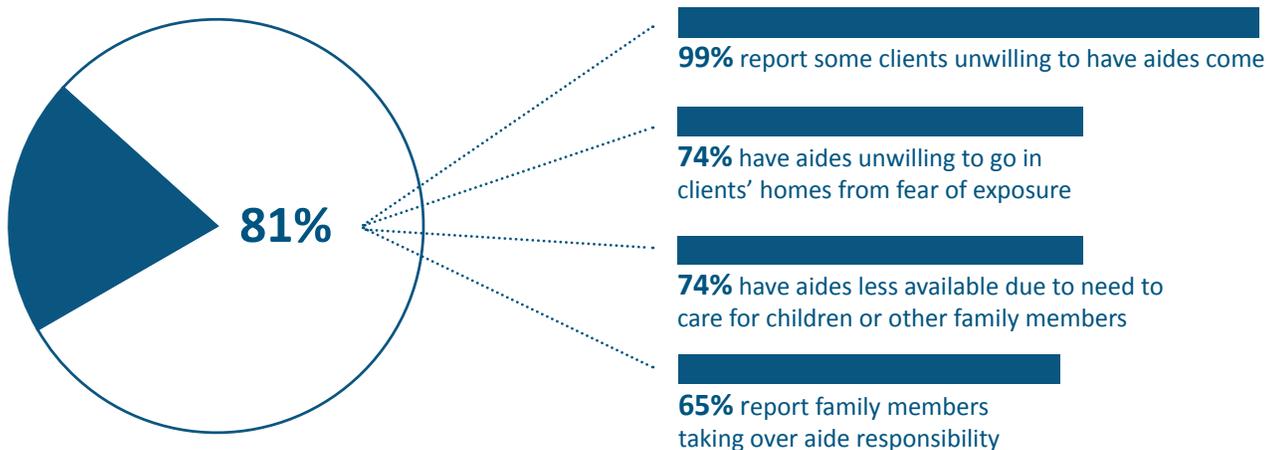
These concerns are justified:

- 60% say their agencies have worked with clients who have tested positive for COVID-19 or have COVID-19 symptoms
- 76% report at least one aide has tested positive for COVID-19 or had COVID-19 symptoms
- 90% report that an aide or aides have had to quarantine for some period of time because of an exposure to the virus either at work or in the community

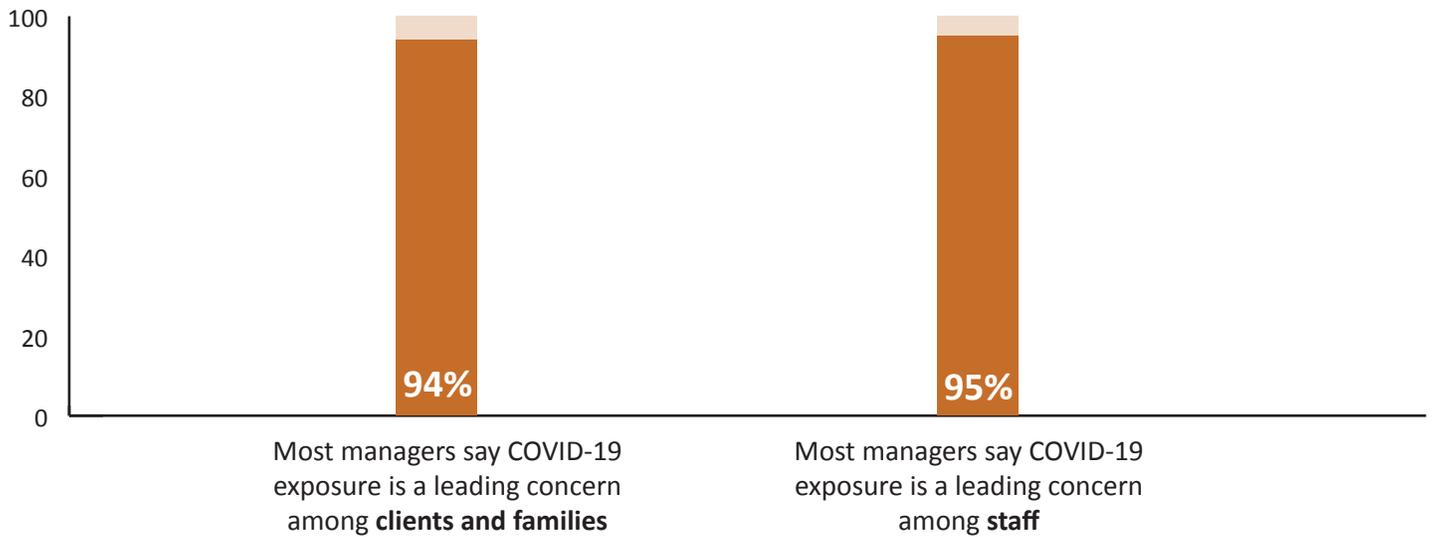
Beyond concerns about getting sick or needing to quarantine because of a work-related exposure to the virus, aides face a variety of other challenges during the pandemic that affect their ability to work. Among agencies that reported declines in client hours, nearly three-quarters (74%) cite a shortage of aides, many of whom needed to care for their own children or other family members.

When managers were asked to rank their agencies' biggest concerns, two interrelated items topped the list: aides becoming infected at work, and having enough aides. These findings suggest that proactive steps will need to be taken to protect the safety of the workforce and preserve aide availability for these essential services throughout the pandemic.

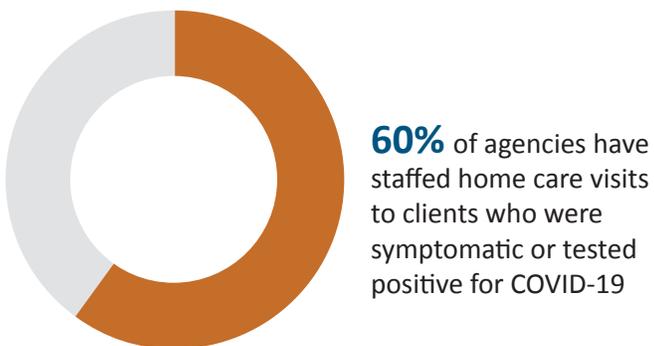
### **81% OF AGENCIES REPORTED A DECREASE IN HOME CARE HOURS**



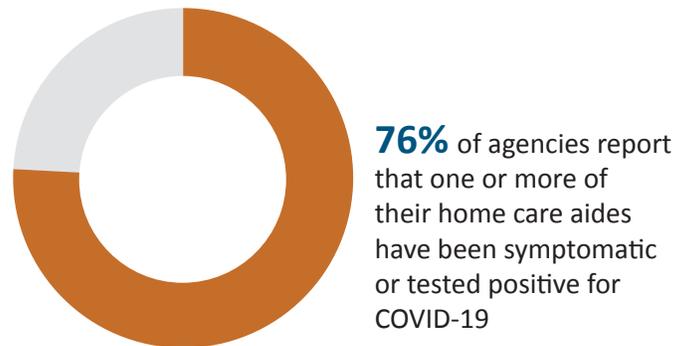
## CLIENTS AND AIDES ARE BOTH CONCERNED ABOUT COVID-19 EXPOSURE



## HOME CARE AIDES VISIT CLIENTS WITH COVID-19



## HOME CARE AIDES CONTRACT COVID-19



## FINDING: Provisioning staff with PPE is both a top priority and a challenge for agencies

Adequate PPE (personal protective equipment) is essential for the home care workforce and their clients due to the risk of exposure to COVID-19 associated with tasks that do not allow safe social distancing (e.g. oral care, bathing, dressing, physical therapy). Agency managers have significant concerns about accessing PPE and training staff to use PPE.

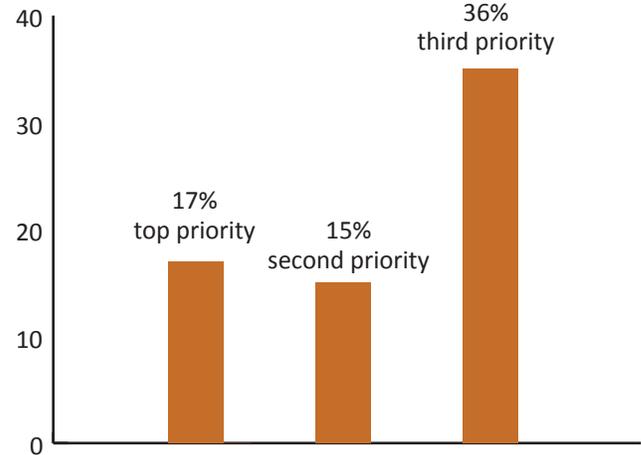
From the survey:

- 68% ranked providing adequate PPE as one of the top three concerns facing the agency
- 43% reported that staff had identified lack of PPE as a concern

These concerns are justified. Managers who report that their agencies are serving clients with COVID-19 are prioritizing PPE such as N95s and disposable gowns for visits with those clients. However, this spring only 70% were able to purchase N95s and only 87% could obtain disposable gowns when needed. Furthermore, just 29% of agency managers who had clients with COVID-19 were confident their agency was sufficiently trained on how to fit test an N95, potentially reducing the effectiveness of this essential piece of PPE.

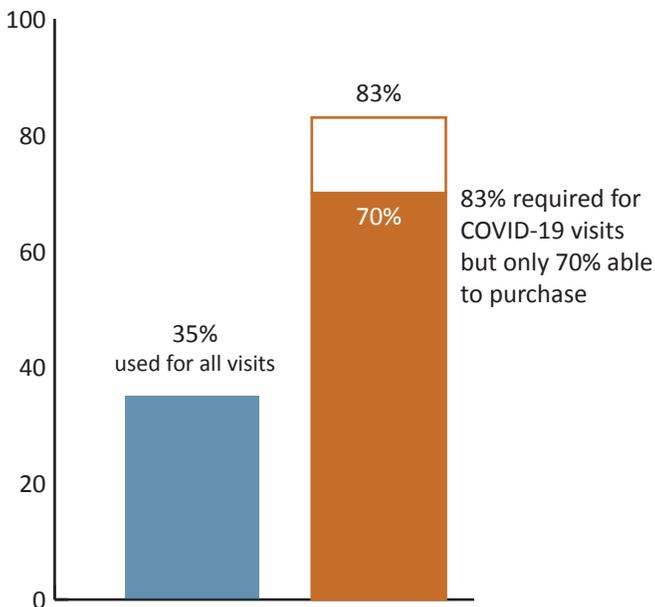
As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, adequate access to and appropriate training on PPE is needed for this workforce to safely provide indispensable services. Without PPE, there will continue to be a significant risk of COVID-19 exposure for home care clients and home care aides.

### ADEQUATE PPE IS A PRIORITY FOR AGENCIES

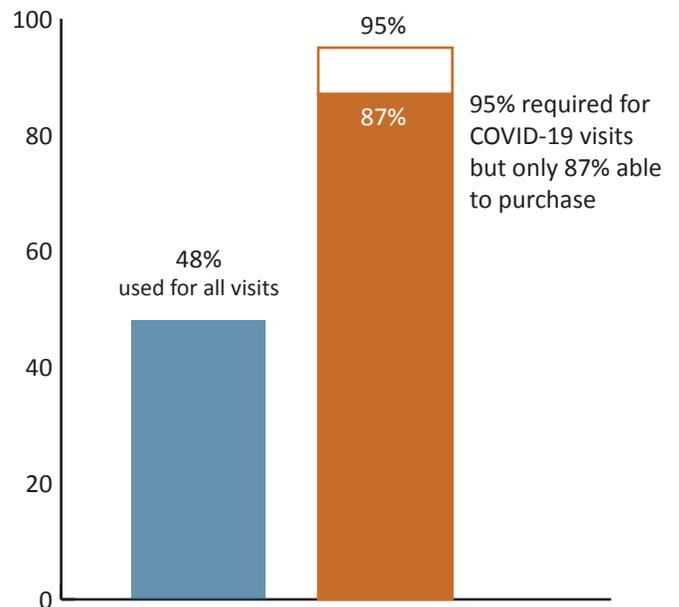


### AGENCIES HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO PURCHASE ENOUGH PPE

#### N-95 RESPIRATORS



#### DISPOSABLE GOWNS



Results limited to managers who report agencies have served COVID-19 positive clients.

## **FINDING:** Guidance and policies to protect against COVID-19 are difficult to interpret and apply to the home care environment

The novel nature of COVID-19 means policies to prevent its transmission are evolving. Not unexpectedly, the need to implement constantly changing guidance into practice can be challenging for home care agencies, aides and clients. Over half of the agency managers (52%) report that staff have difficulty interpreting rules and policies for managing COVID-19 spread, and nearly half (47%) say that clients' and families' second-most important concern (after exposure) is confusion about interpreting Massachusetts' rules for managing COVID spread.

Agency managers express confidence about their staff's knowledge of infection prevention practices with 98% of managers reporting that their staff has received adequate training on COVID-19 infection prevention practices. Yet the rapidly changing landscape for safely delivering home care during the pandemic presents challenges for developing, communicating and implementing new policies and practices.

Infection prevention protocols are relatively well-understood but can be challenging to implement in the home care environment. For example, homes may have

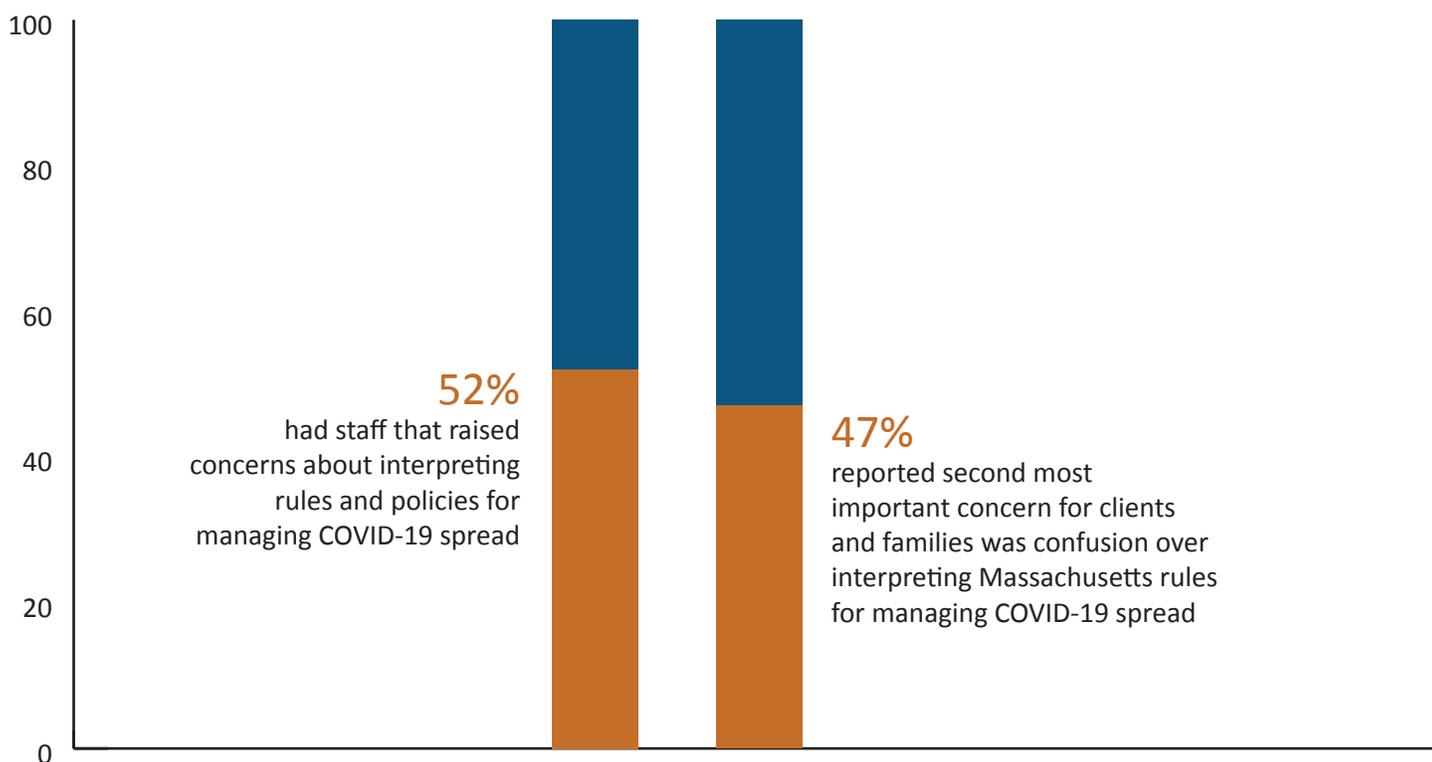
excess clutter that interferes with tasks or residential cleaning supplies that are not up to the standards of other settings where people get health care.

Nearly two-thirds (65%) of agency managers report clients' homes don't have necessary cleaning and disinfection supplies and over half report that infection control guidance issued at the federal and state level is difficult to follow in the home care context.

Agency managers have increased their administrative workload to handle the shifting demands in scheduling, safety protocols, training, and workforce availability. Two-thirds (67%) of managers report the amount of time spent on scheduling activities increased and 85% say the number of hours required to address new policies, procedures or training increased.

Home care leadership, staff and clients should be active participants in the development of guidelines and protocols for preventing the transmission of COVID-19 in home care settings to ensure policies will work in residential environments and minimize confusion when interpreting new and evolving policies and rules.

### **RAPIDLY CHANGING GUIDANCE IS DIFFICULT TO TRANSLATE INTO PRACTICE**



## **FINDING:** Inconsistent communication about COVID-19 risk compromises prevention and safety efforts

Exposure to COVID-19 is a vital concern, but nearly half (46%) of the agency managers reported they do not always know when a client is COVID-19 positive. This lack of information is even more concerning when considering home care workers do not interact solely with clients in private homes.

Over half (56%) of the agency managers report their aides work in other health care institutions with high-risk patients and clients, such as nursing homes or assisted living residences. If home care agencies do not know whether or not their aides are caring for COVID-19 positive clients or patients, they cannot take needed precautions such as proper PPE, prioritizing testing or quarantining potentially exposed home care aides.

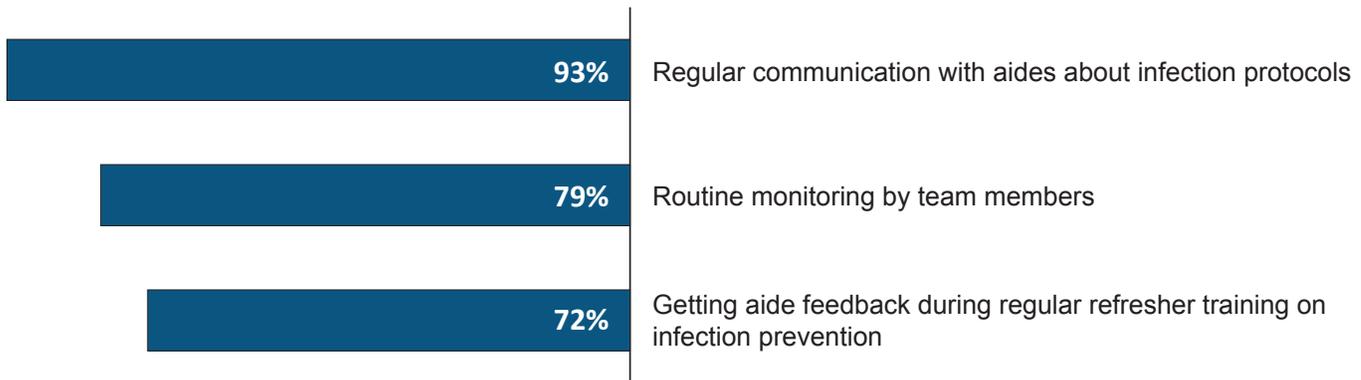
Managers report that there are strong communication channels between their agencies and home care aides that can boost safety efforts. When agencies know that a client is COVID-19 positive, managers notify home care aides. Of the agencies that report being always aware of

COVID-19 positive client status, 96% say that their aides also know that they are caring for a COVID-19 positive individual. Similarly, agency managers indicate that they devote significant resources to assessing whether aides are adhering to infection control procedures.

Managers from 93% of responding agencies report they regularly communicate with home care aides about infection protocols. Seventy-nine percent say protocols are routinely monitored by team leaders and 72% report they get home care aide feedback during regular refresher training on infection prevention.

Home care managers believe COVID-19 will be an ongoing challenge. When asked whether the need to provide visits to clients with COVID-19 was going to increase, decrease, not change or is unknown, only 15% believe that visits to infected clients will decrease. Ensuring home care agencies receive better information about client COVID-19 infection status will help protect both clients and workers from further exposure.

### **THERE ARE OPPORTUNITIES TO LEVERAGE ESTABLISHED COMMUNICATION CHANNELS BETWEEN MANAGERS AND AIDES**



## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Although Massachusetts designates home care aides as essential workers, agencies and aides do not currently have access to the resources available to other health care providers with similar occupational exposure to COVID-19. Policies pertaining to home care should reflect the key role of home health and home care in the health care, disability and elder care systems. In particular, home care will be enhanced by policies that:

- Provide a framework for practice guidance — and securing resources — to prevent infection spread among workers and clients.
- Afford home care agencies and workers the same consideration as other frontline health care organizations and workers caring for people during the pandemic with respect to:
  - Actionable information about the COVID-19 infection status of clients
  - Access to and funding for PPE and disinfection supplies
  - Robust training on proper use of PPE including effective fit testing of N95s
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  - Informational resources on COVID-19 policies relevant to the home care setting
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## NEXT STEPS

These findings from a survey of home care agency managers will soon be supplemented by a companion study of home care workers and Personal Care Attendants (PCAs) and their clients and consumers. This large focus group process will probe the experiences and insights of individuals who have been on the frontlines during the COVID-19 pandemic and will further inform policies to support the safe delivery of care in this essential sector.

## CONCLUSION

COVID-19 exposure and prevention may well be exacerbating long-standing challenges in the home care sector, including inadequate insurance reimbursement for services and living wages for workers. These findings and the expectation that COVID-19 will continue to circulate for some time underscore the need to act now to improve and sustain safe home care for agencies, home care aides and clients.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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