



Nationwide Impact and Response Survey of Optometry Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic

On April 22, 2020, the American Optometric Association (AOA) Health Policy Institute (HPI) launched a survey to assess the impact of the nationwide COVID-19 pandemic on optometry practices and their response to the public health emergency declaration. HPI was the first organization to look at the impact the pandemic has had on the doctor of optometry's ability to remain engaged in and provide frontline care to patients in need since the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provided guidance on postponing some dental and vision care. The survey was designed to collect evidence regarding how doctors of optometry maintained accessibility throughout the pandemic in addition to collecting data on the myriad ways optometry practices were affected and whether doctors of optometry received federal relief opportunities that AOA advocated.

The HPI *Survey of Nationwide Pandemic Impact on Optometry Practices* closed on May 6, 2020 with a total of 1,034 responses from doctors of optometry in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, as follows:

- 95% of respondents were practicing doctors of optometry.
- 72% of these respondents are owner of the optometry practice.
- 20% of practicing doctors of optometry were an employed within a practice.
- 4% were independent contractors.
- 3% were an associate within the practice.
- 82% of total respondents said their optometry practice was not affiliated with a corporate or equity firm, franchise, large group or other organization that handles administrative and/or business operations for the practice.
- 92% of total respondents were current members of the AOA.

Survey participants reported their practice consisted of, on average, 4.1 doctors of optometry and 11 paraoptometric staff.

Four out of five practicing doctors of optometry reported providing emergency or urgent care (surgical and/or non-surgical) during the crisis. Forty-six percent were providing clinical patient care through telehealth, 32% were continuing to provide essential optometric care (surgical and/or non-surgical) and 25% reported providing patient care through normal or modified office hours during the crisis. Eleven percent of doctors of optometry responding to the survey reported they were not currently providing patient care during the crisis with 53% of these being non-owner optometrists in their practice.

The top reported emergency or urgent care services provided by doctors of optometry during the pandemic include treatment for:

- eye infection/conjunctivitis (57%)
- foreign body removal (47%)
- flashers and floaters (24%)
- eye disease (22%)
- corneal abrasions (22%).

Twenty-six percent of doctors providing emergency or urgent care reported that that care included surgical care with 92% of these doctors reporting foreign body removals. Additional procedures reported among these respondents included epilation, lachrymal procedures, debridement, incision and drainage of cyst. Doctors of optometry estimate that 60% of the patients they treated during the pandemic would have otherwise sought care at an emergency department or other urgent care setting had the optometric practice not been providing essential, urgent or emergency optometric care during the surveyed time period, corresponding to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

The protocols of the pandemic required many doctors to begin using telehealth services to provide care to their patients. Doctors of optometry estimated that 42% of the care they provided during the pandemic was traditional telehealth services and 53% of the care was provided through traditional in-person services delivered remotely. Fifty-six of telehealth care was delivered by phone and the remaining 44% of telehealth care was delivered through a video link. Doctors of optometry were able to first hand experience benefits and limitations of telehealth usage for eye care. The most frequently reported benefit to telehealth was the ability for doctors to stay in contact with their patients, discuss COVID-19 comorbidities, and educate patients to alleviate patient fears. The most frequently reported limitation of telehealth in eye care is the limited views and the inability to provide a complete exam. AOA continues to believe telehealth services provide neither a complete exam nor a substitute for ongoing eye care.

With doctors of optometry providing limited services throughout the pandemic, it is not surprising that the majority of survey participants (92%) reported seeing less than 25% of their typical pre-pandemic patient volume, 82% of participants are seeing less than 10% and 68% reported seeing less than 5% of their pre-pandemic patient volume.

Seventy percent of doctors report having received provider relief payments for HHS Medicare/Medicaid during the crisis. In addition:

- 82% percent applied for the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) but only 46% reported receiving PPP relief funds.
- 45% applied for the Economic Injury Disaster Loan Program (EIDL) yet only 15% received the relief funds.
- 27% applied for the Medicare accelerated payments with 22% having received the relief.
- 5% applied for the Emergency Family Medical Leave (EFML) with 2% having received.
- 80% report having applied for relief funds through their state government with only 6% reporting having received the relief.

Sixty percent of doctors of optometry report having received the most helpful information on relief programs from the AOA or their state affiliate. Other sources reported include:

- 7% received the most helpful information on relief programs from their bank.
- Less than 6% reported receiving helpful information on relief programs from government websites, news media, social media, or the American Academy of Optometry (AAO).
- 16% reported receiving helpful information on relief programs for other sources not mentioned.

Forty-two percent of responding doctors reported they received the most helpful information on other issues relative to the pandemic from the AOA or their state affiliate. Nineteen percent reported receiving the most helpful information from the news media, 14% received from government websites, less than 1% report receiving the most helpful information on other issues relative to the pandemic from their bank and AAO.

More than half of survey participants report that their practice was mandated to close, they've had to furlough employees, and they have an inadequate supply of personal protective equipment (PPE). Three out of four doctors of optometry have personally taken a reduction in income to protect their practice and one in four have laid off employees. Forty-six percent of doctors have received an increase in contact lens verification calls during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Doctors of optometry, like other physicians, realize the hazard of patient care during the pandemic, with 3% of doctors report having treated patients who were diagnosed or tested positive for COVID-19 and 2% report that either they or their staff have been diagnosed or tested positive for COVID-19.

Nearly all survey participants (99.7 %) plan to reopen their office after restrictions on social distancing are lifted. The majority of responding doctors (35 %) were planning to reopen the first week of May. Twenty percent of respondents say they will reopen as soon as they are allowed and 23% plan to reopen mid- to late May. Ninety-four percent plan to reopen their office differently from their pre-pandemic status. All have indicated they will decrease their patient volume and limit the number of patients in the office upon reopening to allow for appropriate social distancing. Additional changes that doctors plan to implement include increased time between appointments to allow for additional sanitation of the equipment and office, utilizing the parking lot as a waiting room, temperature checks on staff and patients prior to entry, increased use of PPE and requiring face masks for all patients. Most doctors will provide curbside delivery of durable medical equipment, medical devices and other supplies and some indicate they will continue to utilize telehealth for triage of patients into care. Doctors of optometry will undoubtedly experience additional struggles as they begin the process of reopening their practices while implementing new state and local requirements.