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October 18, 2024

The Honorable Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Gillibrand:

Thank you for your letter to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Mandy K. Cohen, MD, MPH, regarding the World Trade Center (WTC) Health Program and the performance of Managed Care Advisors (MCA)-Sedgwick as the Nationwide Provider Network (NPN) in administering services to 9/11 responders and survivors since taking over the NPN contract in August 2022. I am responding on behalf of Dr. Cohen.

The WTC Health Program (the Program) takes any barrier to the prompt delivery of effective healthcare to members very seriously. The Program transitioned the vendor that administers the NPN to MCA-Sedgwick on August 1, 2022. The months following this complex transition saw three key challenges in accessing care: (1) call center wait times and customer service, (2) access to network providers, and (3) claims processing. The Program has made major progress in addressing these challenges, including slashing call center wait times, tripling the number of network providers, recruiting and enrolling new providers in underserved regions, providing a direct line of communication between members and MCA-Sedgwick to connect them to pre-screened in-network providers, and dedicating significant resources to improve NPN claims processing. Work is ongoing in these areas, and we will strive to continually improve the level of care and service we provide to Program members. Below, I describe these issues and the steps we've taken to date to address them.

NPN Call Center

At the start of the MCA-Sedgwick contract in August 2022, the call center wait times were very high, with an average speed to answer at 18 minutes, 12 seconds, and a 37% abandon rate. A contract modification of approximately \$23 million was awarded in May 2023 to address higher-than-anticipated call volumes and allow MCA-Sedgwick to obtain additional staffing. Beginning in July 2023, the Program observed significant improvements in the average speed to answer and the abandon rate. In July 2024, the average speed to answer was 35 seconds with an average 0.5% abandon rate. The Program has also worked with MCA-Sedgwick to improve customer service, including improving online resources for members, assisting with call center training and education, and developing and implementing new streamlined processes.

Access to Network Providers

As part of the transition from OptumServe (formerly Logistics Health Incorporated), MCA-Sedgwick implemented a new provider network for the NPN. MCA-Sedgwick initially used Prime Health Services as the primary provider network for the WTC Health Program NPN. The Program quickly identified coverage gaps in the Prime Health Services network, resulting in diminished geographic and specialty area coverage. Many of the providers who were previously seeing NPN members under OptumServe were no longer in network or no longer willing to participate in the Program. To allow for continuity of care, the Program allowed members to continue seeing out-of-network providers until a long-term solution could be put in place.

In 2023, MCA-Sedgwick signed a contract with First Health, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Aetna, to provide an additional provider network for the NPN, bolstering access to care for Program members across the country. The expanded network was effective on August 1, 2023, and increased the number of network providers nationwide from approximately 450,000 to 1.3 million. Prime Health Services and First Health are commercially available rented networks that contract with many different health plans throughout the country.

Since expanding the network, the Program has seen a significant improvement in access to care, but some difficulties remain. A provider is considered a network provider if they have an agreement with one of the rented networks (i.e., First Health and Prime Health Services). This agreement permits the provider to offer services to NPN WTC Health Program members. However, not all network providers are willing to treat WTC Health Program members. This is often due to providers being unwilling to accept Program-specific requirements, such as statutorily required Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA) rates for payment and coordination of benefits for survivor members, as well as confusion regarding the Program's coverage being limited to only WTC-related conditions. The NPN, regardless of who administers it, is more vulnerable to these difficulties due to the likelihood of a new provider network when there is a transition between vendors, the geographical diversity of the Program's membership, and providers who lack experience or familiarity with the Program compared to providers at the Program's Clinical Centers of Excellence in the New York metropolitan area.

Finding providers to perform Initial Health Evaluations (IHEs) and Annual Monitoring Exams (AMEs) is challenging because these exams are a unique Program benefit and require additional training, education, and paperwork for providers. While recruiting providers to perform IHEs and AMEs has improved significantly with the implementation of the new network in 2023, some geographic locations still require attention. For example, the Program is actively working with MCA-Sedgwick on their efforts to recruit and enroll providers in Hawaii and Massachusetts. At the time of this letter, the Program has identified only one NPN member due for an AME, for whom there is no AME provider in their area. The Program and MCA-Sedgwick continue to work to recruit additional providers to the network to perform AMEs for this member and provide more options for all NPN members.

As noted in your letter, the NPN's webpage previously included a link to a provider lookup tool. In January 2023, the Program instructed MCA-Sedgwick to remove the NPN provider lookup tool from their website because it was not customized for WTC Health Program care. The NPN provider lookup tool did not limit results to those providers who have agreed to accept WTC Health Program requirements. As a result, some members using the lookup tool saw providers who were not aware of WTC Health Program requirements, leading to billing issues either because the services were never authorized and therefore not

covered or the provider refused to comply with certain terms required by the Program (e.g., coordination of benefits, FECA rates, etc.).

The Program is taking steps to proactively ensure members are referred to network providers who have agreed to participate in the WTC Health Program, understand Program requirements, and can address the treatment needs of individual members. Instead of using a lookup tool, when an NPN member seeks a new provider for an IHE, AME, or treatment, they must call MCA-Sedgwick, who will vet providers in advance and call on the member's behalf to establish care. This should reduce the risk of the member encountering issues with their appointments or bills. The MCA-Sedgwick NPN website (www.sedgwickworldtradecenter.com/information-for-members-on-npn-providers/) contains contact information on who to call for assistance with finding and scheduling an appointment with a provider who is in-network for the WTC Health Program.

The Program is developing various strategies to improve access to care in the NPN. For example, the Program has brought on new staff with provider network experience to work directly with MCA-Sedgwick to educate and recruit providers to participate in the NPN. They are currently targeting hard-to-reach geographical regions, larger medical institutions, and Comprehensive Cancer Centers. MCA-Sedgwick is also exploring contracts with additional provider networks to fill potential gaps in specialty provider areas, such as mental health. Recently, MCA-Sedgwick signed a new contract with Magellan Federal, a network that specializes in behavioral health services and is made up of over 100,000 providers nationwide, including access to telehealth services. The goal is to have this new network available to members by early 2025. The Program is also working on improving communication with members about the process for finding providers, including Program and MCA-Sedgwick website updates. The Program and MCA-Sedgwick have prioritized improved education for providers and are conducting webinar trainings regarding IHEs and AMEs, sending educational materials before appointments, and simplifying the IHE and AME guidance and exam forms for NPN providers.

Claims Processing

A critical component of the NPN contract with MCA-Sedgwick is medical claims processing. Following the transition from OptumServe to MCA-Sedgwick, the Program identified problems with claims processing, including the duration of processing time and processing inaccuracies (e.g., incorrectly approving or denying claims). The Program has dedicated significant resources to improve NPN claims processing by re-training MCA-Sedgwick on the Program's unique claims processing requirements; implementing new payment methods that allow faster turnaround times for payments; performing weekly claims reviews to identify potential errors; and assisting with the development and implementation of claims system automation, which will allow faster and more accurate processing. The Program also meets and communicates with MCA-Sedgwick weekly to address claims issues reported by members and providers. Progress is ongoing, and the Program continues to implement additional measures to improve NPN claims processing, efficiency, and consistency.

The transition from OptumServe to MCA-Sedgwick was the first of its kind for the Program, and many lessons were learned from the process. When transitioning care from one vendor to another, the Program tries to mitigate disruption as much as possible. The Program strives for continuous improvement throughout the lifetime of a contract. If any of your constituents are unable to get their NPN issues resolved directly with MCA-Sedgwick, they should contact the Program's call center at 1-888-982-4748 or email the Program at wtc@cdc.gov for assistance from our member services team. A representative will contact the member, work with the vendor to solve the issue, and provide regular communication.

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I appreciate your letter and support, and that of Congress overall. If you have further questions, please have your staff contact Jeff Reczek in our CDC Washington Office at (202) 245-0600 or JReczek@cdc.gov.

Sincerely,

John Howard, M.D.
Administrator
World Trade Center Health Program

cc:

The Honorable Mike Braun
The Honorable Anthony D'Esposito
The Honorable Andrew Garbarino

The Honorable Dan Goldman
The Honorable Jerry Nadler
The Honorable Charles E Schumer

