

May 12, 2020

Dear member of Congress,

On behalf of the 19 undersigned faith organizations, we write to thank you for your leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic and urge you to prioritize the health care of vulnerable communities in the next major legislative package. As people of faith, we are called to protect the most vulnerable among us - including low income people, communities of color, immigrants, indigenous people, incarcerated individuals, and front-line workers. Studies indicate that these vulnerable populations are disproportionately impacted by the coronavirus. For example, African American communities across the United States have experienced disproportionately high rates of infection and morbidity.¹ Similarly, the Navajo Nation has the third-highest infection rate of any place in the nation, behind New York and New Jersey.² Many prisons and jails have become hotspots for infection, as more than 21,000 inmates have already tested positive for coronavirus while nearly 300 have died.³ We must ensure that all people have access to quality, affordable health care during this public health crisis.

We urge you to include the following health care priorities in the next major package:

- **Expand access to testing for all.** The Families First Coronavirus Response Act and CARES Act significantly expanded coverage for diagnostic testing under public and private insurance, but testing remains inaccessible and inadequate. In particular, although the Families First Act allows states to use Medicaid funding to cover testing, many states do not have enough money to cover this need. Congress must significantly increase federal funding for testing, including for the uninsured and noncitizens. Specialized testing sites should be established in vulnerable communities, such as low-income neighborhoods, communities of color, and indigenous communities. Testing should also be readily available in all federal and state prisons and jails as well as all immigrant detention facilities.
- **Ensure free and accessible treatment for all.** Treatment remains inaccessible and expensive for many Americans. Although several commercial insurers are waiving patient costs for COVID-19 treatment and President Trump has directed providers to use a portion of the \$100 billion allocated to hospitals under the CARES Act to cover care for uninsured people, this funding is not enough.⁴ Congress must increase federal funding for treatment, mandate that all public and private insurance plans cover treatment without cost-sharing, and expand Medicaid coverage to provide treatment for the uninsured. Free treatment must be available to minority communities, low-income individuals, and undocumented people, as disease does not distinguish by race, socioeconomic status, or immigration status.

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/07/coronavirus-is-infecting-killing-black-americans-an-alarmingly-high-rate-post-analysis-shows/?arc404=true>

² <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/24/842945050/navajo-nation-sees-high-rate-of-covid-19-and-contact-tracing-is-a-challenge>

³ https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1X6uJkXXS-O6eePLxw2e4JeRtM41uPZ2eRcOA_HkPVTk/edit#gid=1197647409

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/upshot/trump-hospitals-coronavirus.html>

- **Provide additional Medicaid funding for states, localities, and tribes, including a significant increase to the Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP).** Currently, states, localities, and tribes are responsible for much of the cost of response to this emergency, straining their own health care systems and budgets. By increasing the FMAP, state, local, and tribal governments will be better able to address immediate health needs and to use Medicaid to cover costs. Congress must build on the 6.2 percent increase in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and increase FMAP by 5.8 percentage points for a total increase of 12 percent.
- **Open a special enrollment period for health insurance.** As a result of the pandemic, millions of people are losing not only their jobs but also their employer-provided health insurance. While some employees may be eligible to maintain their current plan under COBRA, this is often prohibitively expensive, particularly because employees are required to pay the full premium without any employer contribution. Congress should establish a special enrollment period and provide funding for enrollment assistance to ensure that newly unemployed people can become insured.
- **Direct the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to issue an Emergency Temporary Standard to protect front line health care workers.** Doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals are risking their lives to provide care during this pandemic but still lack basic workplace protections. Congress must direct OSHA to issue an Emergency Temporary Standard, which would require employers to create and implement certain safety protocols. These protocols should apply to private sector health care workers as well as workers in states receiving Medicaid funding.
- **Encourage President Trump to dramatically increase the availability of medical supplies by fully invoking manufacturing authority the Defense Production Act and releasing any remaining medical supplies in the Strategic Defense Stockpile.** Medical providers will be unable to safely and effectively provide care without an immediate increase in ventilators, personal protective equipment, and other medical supplies. President Trump must immediately release any medical supplies left in the Strategic Defense Stockpile to the states and fully invoke manufacturing authority under the Defense Production Act. The federal government must fully fund factory conversion, place orders across multiple companies and industries, and distribute equipment fairly to all states according to need rather than political consideration.
- **Increase funding and access for mental health services.** The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant mental trauma due to job loss, death of loved ones, and social isolation. Congress must allocate significant funding for mental health services and ensure that telehealth is covered at parity with in-person care.
- **Require the Center for Disease Control and Prevention to upgrade data surveillance systems to collect and release robust federal demographic data.** The Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act directed the Center for Disease Control and Prevention to collect and release federal demographic data concerning COVID-19 infection and mortality rates. Unfortunately, the CDC does not have appropriate public health infrastructure to accomplish this. We urge Congress to require the CDC to upgrade their COVID-19 surveillance systems to collect comprehensive demographic data so Congress can begin to understand and address demographic disparities in COVID-19 outcomes.

No matter our faith tradition, we are called to protect the most vulnerable in our communities and ensure that all people can access quality, affordable health care. We urge you to prioritize the above health care recommendations in the next major coronavirus package.

Sincerely,
American Muslim Health Professionals
Bayard Rustin Liberation Initiative
Congregation of Our Lady of the Good Shepherd, U.S. Provinces
Franciscan Action Network
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Islamic Relief USA
Jewish Federations of North America
Jewish Women International
Muslim Caucus of America
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Council of Churches
National Council of Jewish Women
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
Pax Christi USA
Poligon Education Fund
Tennessee Conference, United Methodist Church Board of Church and Society
The United Methodist Church - General Board of Church and Society
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice