

5 Policy Priority Recommendations for COVID-19

The United States is facing its greatest public health emergency in more than a century. Less than three months after the U.S. made its first COVID-19 diagnosis, more than half a million people have contracted the virus, and as of April 13th more than 22,000 people have lost their lives. The rapid spread of COVID-19 has devastated families across the nation, and evidence shows a particularly heavy toll of death and disease in our communities of color, exacerbating profound health disparities. Congress must pass a bipartisan legislative package that provides relief for America's families and addresses the most urgent issues facing our health system as the nation collectively fights to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following targeted recommendations will provide immediate support to communities in America that need relief now. We urge Congress to address five key areas:

1. Safeguard Health Insurance for the American People

America's families need access to affordable, comprehensive health coverage to receive COVID-19 testing, treatment and services. Coupled with the nearly 30 million uninsured people across the nation prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the COVID-driven economic downturn has caused tens of millions of Americans to lose their jobs, forcing millions more workers and their families to join the ranks of the uninsured.

- » New investments in consumer education and assistance are critically needed to help workers overwhelmed by job loss sort through the complexities of health coverage and obtain the insurance they need to keep their families healthy and safe.
- » Congress must support laid-off workers by increasing the generosity of premium tax credits that help pay for non-group private insurance while providing full premium subsidies to laid-off and furloughed workers seeking COBRA coverage.

- » The national health insurance marketplace, healthcare.gov, serving residents in 38 states, should be open to all new enrollments during this crisis.
- » Congress should provide additional financial support to state Medicaid programs at 100% federal funding levels to provide testing and treatment for uninsured residents who contract COVID-19 across states.

2. Guarantee States, Localities, and Tribes Essential Fiscal Relief

Support for states, localities, and tribes in previous COVID-19 relief packages were inadequate to the scale of the economic downturn and the scope of the pandemic.

- » Congress must increase Medicaid federal medical assistance percentages (FMAP) based on state economic conditions — at a minimum, approximately doubling the FMAP increase in Section 6008 of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act while guaranteeing continued fiscal support until economic recovery eliminates states' need for help.

- » Congress must double the Coronavirus Relief Fund established in Section 5001 of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, providing states, localities, and tribes with flexible resources to respond to and address various needs triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Protect the Health and Safety of Essential Workers

Congress must ensure that all workers on the frontlines of this pandemic are safe as they do their jobs. This not only protects their health but also protects the health of all families by maintaining essential services and maximum surge-capacity in the health care system.

- » Congress should require full transparency and national coordination around the production and distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE).
- » To address current safety concerns and prepare the nation for returning to workplaces, Congress also should require the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) issue an emergency temporary standard on infectious disease that would provide protections to all workers for the duration of the pandemic.
- » Congress should dramatically improve paid sick leave for workers affected by the pandemic by removing exemptions for certain employers, improving the level of support for lower-wage workers, and expanding access to the benefit.

4. Organize a Robust National Public Health Strategy to Safely Move Beyond Lockdowns

The future impact of COVID-19 on our communities is uncertain. Infection and death rates are predicted to increase in the short-term, particularly in our most vulnerable communities, and experts warn that depending on the effectiveness of our public health strategies, infections could either resurge, or we could contain the pandemic and prevent further outbreaks. It is critical that public health experts and science drive our national strategies in combating COVID-19.

- » In addition to providing a \$4.5 billion annual increase in public health funding to ensure that infrastructure is in place for this and future outbreaks, Congress should fund the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at least \$3.6 billion in emergency supplemental funding to lead state efforts to oversee the monitoring and reporting of COVID-19, including comprehensive data collection, as well as implement testing, tracing, and quarantine plans.
- » Congress should ensure that experts at the CDC are leading and coordinating efforts with the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), Department of Defense (DOD), private payers, and providers to identify new approaches, best practices, and supporting tools to develop effective COVID-19 strategies as the pandemic's impact on our nation evolves.
- » The CDC should be provided flexibility in its procurement and hiring processes to act as quickly as possible to secure the public health resources it needs to fight the pandemic. Finally, it is critical that during this national emergency, we are rapidly and effectively evaluating the nation's complex response.

5. Protect Patient Access to Care While Prohibiting Price Gouging and Pandemic Profiteering

To help families in America access health care safely:

- » Congress should require that telemedicine services be offered across all health care payers, including those provided telephonically to patients with limited broadband access, making payments at parity with in-person care.
- » As families struggle with both health and economic uncertainties, Congress should enact comprehensive consumer protections from surprise medical bills and prohibit price gouging and excess profits in connection with medical equipment for health care providers and consumers.
- » As vaccines and treatment for COVID-19 are developed, Congress must ensure that these drugs remain accessible and affordable to all who need them.

This publication was written by:

Sophia Tripoli, Director of Health Care Innovations, Families USA

This publication was edited by:

Eliot Fishman, Senior Director of Health Policy and
The Families USA Healthy Policy Team

The following Families USA staff contributed to the preparation of this material (listed alphabetically):

Kimberly Alleyne, Senior Director, Communications
Nichole Edralin, Senior Manager, Design and Publications
Frederick Isasi, Executive Director
Adina Marx, Communications Associate

FAMILIESUSA
THE VOICE FOR HEALTH CARE CONSUMERS

1225 New York Avenue NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20005
202-628-3030
info@familiesusa.org
FamiliesUSA.org
facebook / FamiliesUSA
twitter / @FamiliesUSA