Is America now ready to sufficiently invest in a new public health infrastructure? An infrastructure that engages in the science and policy of protecting and improving the health of all communities – insured and uninsured, majority and minority, immigrant and undocumented, able and disable, and rich and poor? A public health system where all individuals are offered health information and education, promotion of healthy lifestyles and health care, and research to reduce disease and prevent injury that is culturally congruent and embraces the values of fairness and inclusion?

What America Needs

What America needs most right now is a public healthcare system that reduces fears and anxieties, alleviates human suffering, and addresses healthcare disparities as well as social determinants of health. America needs a federal government that assertively promotes and helps coordinate good information, from rigorously designed studies, about the prevalence and deadliness of coronavirus infections. A system where healthcare policies and systems work seamlessly to detect outbreaks, contain them, and seek to protect the entire population. Americans expect their elected officials to use science and data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to promote recommendations and rules for social distancing, face masks, and reopening that are sensible and sustainable for their communities.

As the nation adjusts to guidelines and determines how, when, where, and who can safely return to businesses, schools, and campuses, it must provide testing and contact tracing. Testing and surveillance are needed to determine when the country can reopen safely. If America is to be virus free, everyone must have access to periodic testing and comprehensive and mandatory contact tracing.

How We Build

Building a 21st century public healthcare system will take all of us. The Affordable Care Act (ACA) provided coverage for the national response to COVID-19. It ensured that public and private health insurance plans cover COVID-19 testing without cost sharing. The ACA has become essential to the healthcare system for millions of Americans who would lose health insurance under private health plans, Medicaid, and Medicare.

It has taken a 21st century pandemic to push our nation’s healthcare delivery system to the brink. Many of our frontline responders, including nurses, physicians, and emergency medical technicians, have openly shared their need for personal protective equipment and risks associated with caring for patients with COVID-19. Their experiences of frustration, exhaustion, and profound sadness on the frontline warrants a new call to action – one that commits to building an American public health infrastructure that cares for all and is governed by the principles of equity and social justice.

Now more than ever, Americans need access to care, including behavioral health services to address the mental and physical stresses caused by fears of layoffs and unemployment, which leave many feeling suicidal. The work of economists such as Blanchflower (2008) and Clark and...
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Oswald (1994) highlight how higher unemployment is the economic variable linked to rising unhappiness and greater cost to personal well-being. The impacts of COVID-19 are causing real societal distress and despair.

Power, Passion, and Political Will

It is time to build a 21st century public health system with the power, passion, and political will that advances the nation’s health care and protects the health and safety of all. This contemporary public health infrastructure should include public health scientific knowledge, health guidance, and clinical best practices that protect our most vulnerable populations (medically underserved, susceptible, undocumented, older adults, children, persons of color, homeless, uninsured or underinsured). There is no time to wait. We must mandate our federal government to create a wartime footing, calling for private-public partnerships to put “all hands on deck” to achieve efficient herd immunity through vaccination or actual infection and recovery. This is how a 21st century public health system is built. $

References