

## A BLUEPRINT FOR THE 2021 ADMINISTRATION AND CONGRESS

# The Promise of Good Health for All: Transforming Public Health in America



The nation's public health system is dangerously inadequate and needs sustained attention and investment; this report provides an action plan for the administration and Congress taking office in 2021 to strengthen the U.S. public health system.

The COVID-19 pandemic sharply illuminated long existing weaknesses in the nation's public health system and ways in which structural racism put communities of color at disproportionate risk of negative health outcomes. This report offers a blueprint and action plan for policymakers taking office in 2021 on how to strengthen the system, protect against health security threats, address the social determinants of health, and combat racism and other forms of discrimination that negatively affect community and individual health and resilience.

Americans are facing increasing environmental and weather-related threats from wildfires to hurricanes. Infectious disease outbreaks are a constant and complex

risk as world travel allows small outbreaks to become worldwide threats in a matter of hours. Additionally, Americans have higher levels of chronic disease and mental health and substance misuse issues than ever before. As a nation, we spend over \$3 trillion annually on healthcare but lag behind other developed countries in practically every health metric. A key to addressing these threats to the nation's health is a significant investment in the public health system, including programs rooted in prevention and working at the population health level. This report calls for an annual \$4.5 billion investment in the nation's public health infrastructure including in 21st century data systems and a robust public health workforce.

The conditions in which people live and work are key drivers of their health. Therefore, solutions to health risks and inequities largely exist outside the healthcare sector and reinforce the importance of investing in population health and the social determinants of health. Increasing the nation's investment in health promotion and disease prevention will not only improve the quality of life for millions of Americans, it will help decrease the nation's exploding healthcare spending.

The report makes policy recommendations within five key priority areas:

## **PRIORITY 1: Make substantial and sustained investments in a more effective public health system including a highly skilled public health workforce.**

### **Recommendations:**

- Strengthen and modernize the public health system by creating a \$4.5 billion per year Public Health Infrastructure Fund to support foundational public health capabilities at the state, local, territorial, and tribal levels.
- Build 21st century public health data and surveillance systems at the federal, state, local, territorial and tribal levels to enable rapid detection and response to disease threats.
- Create a Health Defense Operations budget designation to build sustainable funding for public health programs that prevent, detect and respond to outbreaks.
- Strengthen federal leadership and coordination and ensure that public health policy is non-partisan and based on science.
- Support and bolster the public health workforce. Recruit and retain a workforce skilled in data management, disease surveillance, emergency preparation and response, addressing the social determinants of health, health equity, program administration and evaluation, and public communications.

## **PRIORITY 2: Mobilize an all-out effort to combat racism and other forms of discrimination and to advance health equity by providing the conditions that optimize health.**

### **Recommendations:**

- Create a Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Commission and fund communities to begin the process of acknowledging the history of racism and working to dismantle the myth of hierarchy based on race.
- All agencies collecting health data should be required to collect, disaggregate and report such data in such a way that the impact of health conditions, policies or interventions on specific populations groups are known.
- Make advancing health equity and eliminating health disparities a national priority with a senior-level, federal interdepartmental task force charged with adopting policies and programs in housing, employment, health, environmental justice and education that reduce health inequities and address the social determinants of health. Congress should enact, fund and build on the Health Equity and Accountability Act (HEAA).
- Expand grants to address health inequities and ensure funding is reaching under-resourced, marginalized, and disproportionately affected communities and adapt grantmaking practices to account for differential community needs, resources, and capacity. Federal agencies should consider disease burden and social context when determining grantmaking eligibility criteria so the communities with the greatest need can benefit from competitive grant mechanisms.

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“Even before COVID-19, numerous health emergencies, including infectious disease outbreaks like measles, Zika and Ebola, the opioid epidemic, weather-related events and lung injuries due to vaping demonstrated the urgency of a strong public health system,” says John Auerbach, President and CEO of Trust for America’s Health. “Each of these emergencies brought short-term attention to the importance of the public health system, but short-term attention is not enough. Without sustained investment the nation’s public health system we will not be ready to protect Americans’ lives and livelihoods during the next health emergency,” Auerbach said.

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### **PRIORITY 3: Address the social determinants of health including economic, social, and environmental factors that result in preventable illness, injuries and death.**

#### **Recommendations:**

- Congress should authorize and fund a social determinants of health program at CDC. The Improving Social Determinants of Health Act would authorize a program that would support state and local public health or other appropriate agencies to work across sectors, gather data and establish plans to address key social determinants, such as housing, food, safety and transportation.
- A White House-led strategy should focus on addressing the root causes of disease and on promoting health equity. The administration should develop innovative payment models and/or incentives for insurance plans and healthcare systems to promote value-based payment to screen for and address patients’ non-medical social needs.
- HHS should prioritize local, state, and federal evidence-based public health policies to effectively improve the social determinants of health and develop mechanisms to scale these programs nationwide.
- The federal government should prioritize the elimination of poverty. Poverty is strongly associated with morbidity and mortality and income-related health disparities are growing. Strategies that have demonstrated a positive health impact include increasing the national minimum wage, expanding state and federal earned income tax credits, growing support for affordable housing and making childcare more affordable.

### **PRIORITY 4: Proactively address threats to the nation’s health security.**

#### **Recommendations:**

- Prioritize increased funding for state, local, tribal, and territorial public health emergency preparedness and response programs, such as CDC’s Public Health Emergency Preparedness program and HHS’s Hospital Preparedness Program.
- Congress should provide regular, no-year infusions of funds into the Public Health Rapid Response Fund and/or the Infectious Disease Rapid Response Fund to serve as a temporary bridge between preparedness and supplemental emergency funds.
- Build surge capacity across the healthcare system and develop standards for healthcare facility readiness. Policymakers should provide payment incentives and reward facilities that maintain specialized disaster care capabilities.
- Increase funding for the purchase, pipeline system, distribution and dispensing of medical countermeasures (MCMs) for a wide range of threats. Engage healthcare providers, supply chain leaders and healthcare coalitions in emergency planning efforts.
- Grow the CDC’s Climate and Health Program so it can support every state, large cities, territories, and tribes to be climate ready. Clean air and water regulations should be restored and strengthened, including the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act.

## **PRIORITY 5: Improve health, safety, and well-being for all people by providing pathways to optimal health across the life span.**

### **Recommendations:**

- Increase research and effective messaging to build vaccine confidence and ensure that no person faces barriers to receiving all necessary vaccinations. Increase annual funding for the nation's vaccine infrastructure through CDC's immunization program (the "317" program).
  - Ensure all Americans have access to affordable health insurance coverage by strengthening incentives to expand Medicaid in all states and making marketplace coverage more affordable.
  - Congress should create a national standard mandating job-protected paid family and medical leave for all employees.
  - Address the nation's obesity crisis by expanding programs that ensure all Americans have improved access to healthy and affordable foods and opportunities for physical activity, such as adequately funding CDC's State Physical Activity and Nutrition grants to ensure every state can implement obesity strategies, and further fund CDC's Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) program to carry out local, culturally appropriate programs.
  - Create conditions for children that promote short and long-term good health by investing in early childhood programs and schools. Head Start, Early Head Start, WIC and pre-kindergarten programs should be expanded so all children have access to early childhood education and nutrition.
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- All youth-serving programs should adopt trauma-informed and culturally competent policies and practices. Zero tolerance policies and other punitive tactics in schools that disproportionately remove children of color from school and send them to juvenile justice rather than mental health care such be prohibited.
  - Protect adolescents from harm by investing in proven programs to prevent bullying, dating violence, suicide, tobacco use and alcohol and substance misuse such as social emotional learning and mental health in schools.
  - Congress should fund a Healthy Aging program within CDC to build state and local public health departments' capacity to promote the health and well-being of older adults. The unit would coordinate grants so that states can implement evidence-based programs that reduce risk factors for chronic illness, social isolation and healthcare costs thereby improving the health of older adults.

The report is endorsed by the American Public Health Association, the Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum, the Big Cities Health Coalition, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, the Prevention Institute, the Public Health Institute, the National Network of Public Health Institutes, and Well-being and Equity (WE) in the World.

**Read the full report at <https://www.tfah.org/report-details/blueprint2021/>**



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