

March 18, 2020

Office of the Governor
Via email: Governor.Lamont@ct.gov

175 Main Street
Third Floor
Hartford, CT 06106
860-461-7637

Dear Governor Lamont,

Thank you for the decisive actions the state has taken to mitigate the spread of disease and the impact of containment measures. We write today to respectfully urge that while responding to the immediate emergency, the needs of already disenfranchised and under-resourced communities are considered and addressed.

The current pandemic and emergency response will widen the dramatic health disparities faced by Connecticut's people of color and low-income residents. Income inequality results in health disparities in the best of times and is linked to higher rates of disease, increased rates of complication and death from disease, and less access to social and economic support. As a result of systemic injustice, people of color are at higher risk of complications from coronavirus due to higher rates of chronic disease and less access to health care.

The effects of this situation will have repercussions beyond the duration of the pandemic's peak. Many thousands of Connecticut's residents will struggle to afford groceries, find shelter, pay unexpected medical bills due to illnesses and injuries unrelated to the pandemic, and keep their jobs while schools and child care centers remain closed. The stress of social isolation and related measures will increase exposure to traumatic conditions such as domestic violence and poverty and, in turn, the need for mental health care. Mitigating the impact of this crisis on people who already experience a disproportionate burden of disease and poverty will require support that lasts beyond the time when schools and restaurants reopen.

We applaud the efforts made thus far to keep people safe and able to access care, such as suspending Medicaid prescription drug limitations, suspending premiums and copays for the Children's Health Insurance Program, expanding telehealth, and establishing a special enrollment period for Access Health CT. We have a number of recommendations that would protect access to care and basic needs for vulnerable people in Connecticut during this difficult time.

Access to Health Care

Medicaid and Commercial Health Insurance:

- Seek approval to suspend Medicaid redeterminations and disenrollments through June at minimum, revisiting this timeline as the pandemic progresses
- Take full advantage of 1135 waiver options to increase health care workforce capacity and temporarily remove preauthorization and utilization management processes to streamline care
- Continue and expand efforts to clear regulatory and other barriers to telehealth services by phone as well as video conference through Medicaid in order to expand the capacity of our health systems and allow people to avoid health facilities, especially for primary care and behavioral health services
- Direct commercial insurance plans to remove barriers to telehealth and remind insurers of the state's existing restrictions on surprise billing

Communication and Outreach:

- Center equity in emergency response efforts by ensuring that communication is tailored to disenfranchised populations and clarifies that cost and immigration status should not be barriers to treatment or cause for future action
- Enhance the ability of care coordinators, social workers, and community health workers to engage in welfare checks by phone or video for individuals at risk due to social isolation, including older people living alone, those coping with mental illnesses or recovery from substance use disorders, and home bound people with limited home-based care

- Seek federal support to alleviate uninsurance and underinsurance or to hold individuals harmless for health care costs incurred during the period of this crisis; Connecticut could temporarily increase eligibility limits for parents and possibly other groups through CMS emergency response options

Other Basic Needs

Food and Shelter:

- Suspend SNAP redeterminations, time limits, and work requirements
- As federal options become available, streamline increases in SNAP benefits related to loss of income or school closures
- Partner with hotels and other suitable facilities to provide shelter for those displaced by facility closures, dorm closures, and domestic violence
- Halt involuntary nursing home and residential care home discharge
- Ensure that measures such as suspended utility terminations and halted evictions are in place long enough to allow people to recover from the crisis

Health Care Workforce:

- Provide childcare for healthcare workers
- Seek permanent loan relief for students seeking to join health and helping professions who expected to graduate this semester and are unable to do so because of delayed practicum or laboratory requirements

Economic Security and Civic Engagement:

- Expedite and continue to seek stimulus funding and grant flexibility for non-profits
- Seek federal support to expedite paid leave for illness or child care for all workers
- Seek federal options for extending unemployment benefits for a sufficient period and continue to pursue options for streamlining the approval process
- Ease restrictions for primary election voting by mail

If we can provide additional information or be of assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me at: teverette@hesct.org or 860.461.7637. Thank you for your tireless work to protect the people of Connecticut.

Sincerely,



Tekisha Dwan Everette, Ph.D.
Executive Director
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cc:

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