

HEALTH EQUITY SOLUTIONS

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Commissioner Deidre Gifford
Department of Social Services
55 Farmington Avenue
Hartford, CT 06106
Via email

Dear Commissioner Gifford,

First, we want to thank you for the rapid and extensive efforts the Department of Social Services has made to address the needs of those enrolled in Connecticut's social services programs. Today, we write to ask that you center the needs of our state's underserved residents in future pandemic response and recovery efforts by increasing outreach through community health workers.

People of color in Connecticut faced wide disparities in health before the current crisis. The widening of these disparities is likely as these communities will bear a disproportionate share of the burden of both disease and efforts to contain its spread. Yet, this is not inevitable. By centering the needs of people who face extraordinary social and economic barriers to accessing health care and basic needs, we can prevent unnecessary hardship. ***Through ongoing conversation with our partners, one proposal has come to the forefront: increased outreach through community health workers.***

We strongly urge the Department of Social Services and the Medicaid program, in particular, to engage in targeted outreach to underserved communities. As recognized by the Medicaid program's deployment of community health workers, navigating health and social services systems can be challenging at the best of times. Now, traditional points of connection and information sharing—like churches, community centers, and support groups—are either unavailable or difficult to access. This further exacerbates the difficulties faced by Connecticut residents who speak English as a second language, find our state's online applications confusing, have personal and historical reasons for distrusting government and health systems, or simply do not know about the existence of supports. ***Community health workers are an evident option for alleviating the adverse social determinants of health that are the cause of so much inequity.***

Community health workers can connect people to services they need—whether unemployment, SNAP, Medicaid, or a telehealth consultation to renew a prescription or prevent the worsening of a condition. A simple conversation can also help to alleviate the strain of social isolation, identify emerging mental health concerns, offer culturally appropriate support for adhering with medical advice, or provide an opportunity to report domestic violence. We have raised the importance of Medicaid-supported community health workers in addressing health disparities in ordinary times. Community health workers are even more important in the current environment.

We also want to note that the health, safety, and needs of community health workers must be considered. Whether via virtual contact or using social distancing and hygiene precautions, outreach efforts that result in low risk for both workers and clients are possible.

As noted, input from our partners has informed Health Equity Solutions' conviction that outreach is a key unmet need during this pandemic. Other priorities related to social services programs that have been highlighted include:

- Timely processing of social services applications supported by adequate staffing and streamlining of application processes
- Transparency in requests to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services for flexibility
- Improved collection and evaluation of race and ethnicity data to inform pandemic response and recovery efforts and avoid preventable disparities
- Leveraging Medicaid to reduce uninsurance during the pandemic

We know that injustice has established barriers to health for our state's people of color.

Community health workers help people to scale these barriers, alleviating pressure on health systems and call centers and, most importantly, empowering people to prevent hardship. Thank you for considering this request to center health equity in the emergency response by deploying community health workers.

Sincerely,



Tekisha Everette, PhD
Executive Director

cc:

Governor Lamont
Paul Mounds
Josh Geballe
Kate McEvoy
Vicki Veltri