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GREENLINING.ORG

April 8, 2020

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
State Capitol Building
Sacramento, CA 95814

California Must Integrate Health & Racial Equity into COVID-19 Response

Dear Governor Newsom,

Thank you for your bold leadership and quick response to address the COVID-19 pandemic. We applaud your decision to allocate disaster response funds and general funds for immediate relief to support the healthcare sector and save lives. The Greenlining Institute writes to respectfully request that the following health and economic equity investments are prioritized as part of the funds and resources made available to help California address COVID-19. This health crisis effects all of us, and priority support should be provided to vulnerable populations like our elders, low-income families of color, undocumented folks & newcomers to our State, and diverse businesses, which we know will be impacted most greatly by the health and economic consequences of the pandemic. Now is the time to integrate a strong health and racial equity lens into policy response to ensure that the most vulnerable survive, recover, and thrive from this public health emergency.

We recommend the following health and racial equity policy priorities for the healthcare sector:

Increase Access to Care for the Most Vulnerable

1. ***Expedite Access to Full Scope Medi-Cal for Elders (65+) Regardless of Immigration Status:***

We thank you Governor Newsom for including the Health4Elders proposal in the initial 2020-21 budget, but are concerned that in your April 2nd press briefing you mentioned that you might back off from this commitment. Elders in our families are a high risk group for experiencing severe complications and even death from COVID-19. The Health4Elders proposal would provide full-scope Medi-Cal to an estimated 27,000 low-income undocumented elders ages 65 and older by removing immigration status as an eligibility exclusion. As part of the Health4All Coalition, we stand with the California Immigrant Policy Center and partners to urge the legislature to act immediately to remove the immigration status eligibility exclusion to full-scope Medi-Cal for undocumented elders as soon as possible to prevent harm during this pandemic.

2. ***Prioritize Emergency Funding & Resources for Primary Care Clinics & Community Health Centers:***

As health systems become overburdened with COVID-19 case loads, the state must support licensed community clinics and health centers, which provide essential health services to underserved communities and low-income neighborhoods regardless of a family's ability to pay for care. Local clinics and community health centers are California's health care safety net for many neighborhoods that lack access to amenities and provide essential care for California's ethnically diverse neighborhoods, women, and children. While full service hospitals and larger health systems are also important, local clinics get by with minimal support and urgently need assistance to respond in this emergency.

3. ***Expand Access to Free Telehealth & Internet Services for Low-income Families:*** Telehealth services are critical during shelter-in-place to give families access to health screenings and to reduce the burden of in-person patient visits. The legislature should waive telehealth medical fees and copays during this time to encourage more Californians to seek preventative screening and consultation and stop the spread of COVID-19. Furthermore, the need for telehealth emphasizes how vital it is for households to have affordable internet access. Internet service allows us to respond quickly in a crisis and get vital health and safety information. However, many low income households lack access to affordable internet services. We need an immediate response: ban disconnections for nonpayment and implement a statewide all-fiber infrastructure project to help bridge the digital divide and provide jobs to help soften the impact of the economic downturn caused by COVID-19.

Hold Hospitals Accountable to the Equitable Treatment of & Investment in Diverse Communities:

1. ***Provide Oversight on Cost Containment & Excessive Medical Billing to Hospitals:*** In an emergency, a patient may unknowingly be taken to a hospital that is outside of their medical network for treatment and get stuck with a huge bill not covered by insurance. [AB 1611 \(Chiu\)](#) would provide oversight and require that out-of-network emergency care services are to be offered at the same cost as a patient's in-network provider at the time of billing. We stand with Health Access and partners to urge the governor to sign this bill into law given the urgency of this issue. We must ensure that low income California families who are already negatively impacted by this financial crisis are not also burdened with excessive medical fees and debt.
2. ***Encourage Hospital Contracts and Procurement with Diverse Businesses:*** As large health systems increase their spending to buy emergency equipment, supplies, and support routine organizational functions (e.g., legal, janitorial, communications, and food services) they should prioritize contracts and procurement with minority-, women-, veteran-, and LGBTQ-owned businesses to support and protect local businesses from the economic downturn. Implementation of [AB 962 \(Burke\)](#) is a first step towards hospital transparency and accountability in supplier diversity, but we need action immediately and cannot wait for hospitals to be incentivized to support diverse businesses through reporting requirements.

As the health and economic impacts of the pandemic unfold, we need you to prioritize supporting the most vulnerable now more than ever. If you have any questions about the recommendations in this proposal or would like to discuss them please contact Kelsey Lyles, Greenlining's Health Equity Program Manager at KelseyL@greenlining.org. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Cc: The Honorable Holly Mitchell, Chair, Senate Budget Committee
The Honorable Phil Ting, Chair, Assembly Budget Committee
The Honorable Toni Atkins, President pro Tempore of the Senate
The Honorable Anthony Rendon, Speaker of the Assembly

Sincerely,
Kelsey Lyles
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