



Let's Build: Freedom. Fairness. Future

Compact for the American Future

Healthcare in the 21st Century

If there is one system in American society that COVID-19 has proven inadequate and not equipped for a national crisis, it's our current healthcare system. It's not much of a surprise — the U.S. spends far and away the most on healthcare per capita than other industrialized countries, with little result. Life expectancy in the U.S. is below that of many of our peer nations. A quarter of Americans skip out on taking prescription medications they need because of the cost.

As a country, we spent **3.6 trillion dollars** on healthcare in 2018. But in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are unable to provide our frontline healthcare workers with masks, gowns and other basic personal protective equipment they need to stay healthy while treating patients. We hear reports of ER doctors setting up sewing stations to make masks and gowns out of sterile wrap, and firefighters and paramedics are also severely impacted by shortages. The CDC's response: use scarves or bandanas.

The shortcomings of our current patchwork system are instructive as we think about building a healthcare system that works for all Americans for the future. From pandemic preparedness to closing the coverage gap to reducing maternal mortality and lowering costs, improving healthcare is a key pillar of the **Compact for the American Future**. Here's how we can do it:

Pandemic Prevention & Preparedness

The coronavirus pandemic and the Trump administration's negligence and at times malfeasance with respect to prevention and response has thrust our government's capacity to be prepared for pandemics into the forefront. Leadership that puts the public health over poll numbers, self-aggrandizement and the whims of the stock market is of course critical step 1 to combatting future pandemics.

From a healthcare standpoint, our system is not built to handle the spread of a deadly virus. We lack personal protective equipment for frontline healthcare workers, meaning many of our doctors and nurses will fall ill in alarming numbers. We do not have nearly enough hospital and ICU beds to treat those with COVID-19 and all other critical patients. And with a respiratory disease like COVID-19, our stockpile of respirators is dangerously under-resourced. Not to mention, our biggest failure to date was the inability to rapidly scale testing to the population.

So, in the midst of this crisis, we must prepare for the next one. Below are some steps that can be taken:

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- ❑ As a first critical step, the Congress should urge the next administration to **reinstate the global pandemic response team** at the National Security Council — the office that Trump disbanded in 2018.
- ❑ Congress should significantly **increase the annual budgets of the Centers for Disease Control, the National Institutes of Health, and the World Health Organization** — the agencies chiefly responsible for preparedness and response to a pandemic. Agencies that Trump has justified his repeated proposals to slash them because, “I’m a business person, I don’t like having thousands of people around when you don’t need them — when we need them, we can get them back very quickly.” The CDC’s budget authority, for instance, dropped nearly 10% from \$7.18B to \$6.48B last year. In 2021 Congress should demand its budget is increased beyond 2018 levels and beef up funding for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases.
- ❑ Since 2008, local public health departments have let 60,000 employees go, amounting to a 25% drop in their workforce. The federal government should make it easier for states to draw resources to **increase funding to state and local health agencies**, which in our federated system are in large part responsible for responding to public health crises.
- ❑ **Paid sick leave** is a critical way to ensure the workforce is healthy and not unnecessarily going to work when they are sick to get a paycheck they wouldn’t if they stayed home. The federal government should take the initiative to immediately expand guaranteed paid sick leave (at least 2 weeks) to all American workers, including hourly and part-time workers. It’s a move that is a boon to both health and productivity.
- ❑ Federal, state, and local governments should conduct **annual pandemic response simulations**, similar to the one run last year that showed the federal government was not prepared for a virus outbreak. These simulations should produce reports that are available to the public.
- ❑ The public health community should **deploy training** for the entire healthcare workforce to be able to respond to future pandemics.
- ❑ Congress should **earmark a rainy-day fund** that can spur the requisite agencies (CDC, FDA) to provide for **free treatment and testing of future viruses** instantaneously, without draw-out legislative processes and an over-reliance on private companies.
- ❑ **Rapid, ubiquitous testing should be the moonshot project of the 21st century**. It is that critical to fighting pandemic diseases.
- ❑ Congress should take notes and **issue formal guidance based on steps that South Korea, Singapore and other countries have taken to successfully contain the virus**. South Korea, in particular, experienced a significant outbreak with at its peak over 900 new cases in one day, but has dramatically “flattened the curve” without economic lockdowns or draconian travel and movement restrictions. So far, we’ve learned what works in this case: quick, aggressive national action with early intervention; widespread

testing; contact tracing and isolation; and unwavering public cooperation. This last piece requires trust in national leaders.

- ❑ Congress should make sure our **health agencies are annually assessing the capacity of our healthcare system** to treat projected pandemics of all types, by ensuring an adequate healthcare workforce, from first responders to doctors, building hospital beds in major cities and rural towns alike, and increasing vital and life-saving medical equipment.
- ❑ When the administration and certain corners of the national media confuse the public, spread disinformation for short-term political gains, and generally obfuscate the truth, Congress should **identify and call on experts and non-political leaders** who can relay critical information to the public and inspire public trust.
- ❑ **National leaders should pay more attention to and seek greater involvement of young people.** From developing an action plan to educate and keep millions of kids busy at home, to stressing the importance of social distancing among young people, it is vital that these large generations of Americans are involved and on board with public health strategies to fight future pandemics.
- ❑ As COVID-19 is showing, pandemics have the potential to cause significant strains to folks' mental health. Congress must shore up the patchwork mental health system for Americans, including expanding access to mental telehealth for low income individuals.
- ❑ Importantly, there must be significant measures put in place to **cushion blows to the economy** that inevitably arise during future pandemics. Action must be broad and swift, including: suspending student loan debt and credit card debt payments; forbearance on mortgage and rent payments; standing up a substantial stimulus fund that has key provisions going forward to ensure transparency, make sure federal dollars are supporting workers and not stock buybacks, allowing for progressive cash infusion to households, and multiyear loans at low or no interest rates to small businesses that retain employees. *More on this in an upcoming memo on what jobs and the economy look like in the Compact for the American Future.*
- ❑ Lastly, Congress must implement **national vote-by-mail**. There is a very real possibility COVID-19 will extend into this November's election, and Americans should not have to choose between casting their vote and protecting their health. Vote-by-mail will both increase turnout and reduce the chances of exacerbating pandemic spread.

Affordable, Quality, and Universal Healthcare for all Americans

Ensuring universal coverage so that every American has affordable, quality healthcare that they can access without barriers is central to improving the system overall and improving lives is necessary for securing freedom for every American. How best can we prepare for a future pandemic? Outside of the measures above, we need to make sure everyone who is sick can get the care they need, and the system can effectively handle the caseload.

Beyond pandemic preparedness, there is great enthusiasm to improve the system. Consistently, healthcare is reported as a top issue among voters, and several national polls showed healthcare being the most important issue that voters will consider going into the 2020 elections. Among Democrats in particular, healthcare features more prominently than in their Republican counterparts. In a recent Gallup poll, for instance, 49% of Democrats ranked healthcare as “extremely important” to determining their vote, while only 22% of Republicans gave it the same precedence, a 27-point differential.

While Democrats are largely united on the importance of healthcare in their daily lives, there are differences in how to achieve a commonly shared value that every American deserves: affordable, quality healthcare. It's no secret why every 2020 Democratic Primary Debate opened with nearly an hour on the healthcare contention between a single payer system and other paths to universal health care. That debate is important, but leaders in Congress should be sure to not let it undercut the key message: that Democrats and progressives fundamentally believe in healthcare for all. The same cannot be said for many conservative lawmakers.

Moreover, 10 years after the passage of the Affordable Care Act, it's as popular as ever among Democrats (94%) and a majority of Independents (53%) approve it as well. Overall, 52% of Americans have a positive view of the ACA. Congress should lean into public opinion and strengthen the ACA, which not only would be feasible in a highly polarized political landscape, but also would serve as a direct contrast to the decade-long effort by conservatives to dismantle the ACA with no backup plan. How should that happen?

- ❑ First, there should be a national campaign to finally urge the 14 states — including Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin — that have not expanded Medicaid to do so immediately, which would expand healthcare coverage to millions of Americans who are still uninsured. In the event of a crisis, this would mean more Americans have a primary doctor to call or visit, with reduced strain on emergency department visits. It means folks won't be afraid to go without care or treatment for fear of otherwise not being able to put food on the table because their care is covered.
- ❑ 78% of Americans said they did not have to give up a health insurance plan they liked because of noncompliance with the ACA, a key positive of the law. A public option that allows individuals or families to buy insurance through Medicare or Medicaid with no premiums and reduced cost sharing for low income Americans and premium assistance for middle class Americans would help close the coverage gap and allow people to keep their current plans.
- ❑ Congress should make real on their promise to end surprise billing by requiring patients to be notified before an out-of-network charge is applied and banning out-of-network charges when patients don't have control over which doctor they see, like in emergency visits.

- ❑ In the face of attacks on the Affordable Care Act and Republican-led lawsuits to do away with protections of the 100 million Americans with pre-existing conditions, Congress should support state efforts to codify ACA-level pre-existing conditions protection laws.
- ❑ A famous 2003 *Health Affairs* article still rings true today: "It's the prices, stupid." Lowering per capita costs will take major strain off the system and make us better prepared for public health crises. As Congress takes action to lower costs, higher-value, cost-effective health solutions should receive greater attention, like universal home visiting and better wages for home health care workers.
- ❑ Congress should enact a [Veterans Bill of Rights](#) to tackle underinsurance and increase access to critical mental health care for veterans.
- ❑ A greater emphasis should be placed on finding solutions to the maternity mortality crisis in the U.S. We lag far behind other industrialized nations and lose far too many women - especially women of color -- to unnecessary and preventable causes during childbirth. Congress should increase funding to study the root causes of this crisis and back evidenced-based solutions.
- ❑ Congress must take action to protect choice and allow women the freedom to choose if, when, and with whom to start a family. Laws should be passed to ensure women can access all forms of reproductive care no matter their geography or income level.

Lowering Prescription Drug Costs

Drug prices have ballooned [60 percent](#) over the last decade, putting vital prescriptions out of reach for 1 in 4 Americans. It's time to confront the drug price epidemic in this country head-on.

As a major priority, Congress should stand up to special interests and allow Medicare to negotiate prescription drug prices like every other payor. Congress should also bar pharmaceutical companies from hiking drug prices above the general inflation rate that are covered by public health plans.

In the face of pandemics, Congress should increase funding and award contracts or increase tax credits for R&D exclusively focused on getting ahead of medication treatment and vaccinations for viruses. In the event of pandemics, pharmaceutical companies that manufacture life-saving drugs should not be allowed to price gouge.

Congress should also exercise more oversight over prescription drug advertising, including barring tax breaks on advertisement spending, and not allowing misinformation to confuse patients in TV ads.

Additionally, action can be taken to increase competition and remove barriers for generics and reduce monopolies that lead to unfair prices. Congress should take action to ban "product hopping" and "pay-for-delay" tactics, and other tricks pharmaceutical companies play to make it difficult for generics to enter the market.

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Finally, Congress should continue to allow states and allow individuals to import safe, low-cost prescription drugs from other countries, such as Canada. This increases competition in the U.S. and lets families get critical treatment without forgoing other necessities.

Improving Rural Healthcare Access

Rural communities have long been overlooked in our current healthcare system. And especially when a pandemic hits, rural communities are often the last to receive critical care they need to stay healthy and survive economically.

Congress should be unwavering in its commitment to improving healthcare access in rural America for now and for the future.

Rural hospitals have been closing at alarming rates, and a quarter of rural hospitals are at risk of being shut down. A national agenda must include keeping those hospitals open and standing up new ones, so no family has critical care too far out of reach. Congress must allow for programs for rural hospitals to stay open as they test new models of care for their communities. Any proposed payment cuts to rural hospitals must be met with fierce opposition and proposals to increased funding to rural hospitals.

Beyond hospitals, Congress should increase funding to preventative health services in rural communities, such as community health centers, low-cost transportation to get folks to health centers, social workers and patient navigators to help patients make sense of their primary care options, and expanding telehealth by finally bringing high-speed broadband to rural America.

Finally, we must shore up the pipeline of healthcare workers in rural communities. Congress can offer loan forgiveness to college and professional school graduates who move to underserved rural communities to work as healthcare providers. Communities can tap into high school and college students already in their areas by expanding credits for courses that put them on track to be health care professionals.

Conclusion

The Compact for the American Future is rooted in a promise: a promise that every American should have the freedom and a fair shot to build the future they want for themselves and their families. Fundamental to that freedom and fair shot are healthy people and healthy communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it increasingly clear that we have work to do to make our healthcare system not only prepared for future crises like this one, but also ready to support future generations of Americans. Congress should lead with an agenda to do just that.

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