

May 20, 2020

The Honorable Patty Murray
154 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Maria Cantwell
511 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Suzan DelBene
2330 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Rick Larsen
2113 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Jaime Herrera Beutler
2352 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Dan Newhouse
1414 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers
1035 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Derek Kilmer
1410 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Pramila Jayapal
1510 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kim Schrier
1123 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Adam Smith
2264 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Denny Heck
2452 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Health coverage affordability and equity during the COVID-19 pandemic

Dear members of the Washington State Congressional Delegation:

Thank you for your leadership to help ensure the health and wellbeing of Washington residents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although Washingtonians have benefited in many ways from the relief measures passed by Congress, the current crisis exacerbates disparities and inequities that leave many without adequate coverage and care. The undersigned organizations urge Congress to take bold action by passing the HEROES Act already adopted by the House and in subsequent COVID relief measures to ensure that all residents have equitable, affordable access to needed health care services, including pandemic-related testing and treatment.

The pandemic has made access to health coverage for all Washington residents even more important but also more out of reach. Affordability continues to be a major barrier for Washington residents to purchase and maintain health insurance. As people lose jobs, entire families lose employer-sponsored coverage. The Office of Financial Management recently issued alarming conclusions about the impact of COVID-19 on Washington State's health coverage: for newly unemployed workers, the uninsured rate increased from 9.6 percent prior to the COVID-19 outbreak to a staggering 52.1 percent by May 9.

The pandemic does not affect all Washingtonians equally. Residents who are Hispanic, Black, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander suffer significantly more COVID-19 infections, according to data from the state Department of Health.¹ Seniors and individuals with chronic health conditions are also affected disproportionately, yet they lack access to affordability assistance and comprehensive coverage comparable to what is provided to younger adults without disabilities. Immigrants in our communities also may lack access to affordability programs and to testing and treatment of COVID-19 infections, affecting the safety of all of us.

We urge Congress to take the following actions to improve health care affordability and address the inequities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

- **Parity of Coverage for Medicare Enrollees**

When low-income older adults and adults with disabilities become eligible for Medicare, they lose access to the comprehensive Medicaid coverage younger, non-disabled adults have in states that expanded coverage under the Affordable Care Act. Compared to Medicaid, the Medicare program is not free to enrollees and does not cover as many important health services. Older adults and those with disabilities cannot get Medicaid if their income exceeds just 75 percent of federal poverty or if they have even very modest resources. ***Congress can address the disparity for Medicare recipients by raising the income limits for Medicaid and the Medicare Savings Programs for this population and by either eliminating or raising the resource limits for these programs.***

- **Disregard Pandemic Unemployment Compensation in Calculating Premium Subsidies**

The CARES Act increased federal unemployment compensation by \$600 per week through the end of July. [Section 2104\(h\)](#) of the CARES Act provides that this compensation is disregarded when determining income for purposes of Medicaid and CHIP. But there is no similar provision to disregard pandemic unemployment compensation in determining income to qualify for tax credits on the Health Benefit Exchange. This differential treatment of unemployment income creates a massive affordability cliff for lower-income consumers who have lost their jobs but do not qualify for Medicaid, canceling out much of the benefit of this relief payment. Counting this income largely eliminates their premium tax credits and cost-sharing assistance. ***The HEROES Act would address this problem by disregarding pandemic unemployment compensation when determining eligibility for marketplace premium tax credits.***

- **Expand Coverage for COVID Testing and Treatment of Uninsured People Regardless of Immigration Status**

Every community member should have access to free testing and treatment for COVID-19, regardless of immigration status. This is both a matter of equity and essential for public health. ***The HEROES Act would expand the optional Medicaid group for COVID testing that was created in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and the CARES Act to cover COVID-***

¹ Department of Health, [COVID-19 Data Dashboard](#); see also Lewis Kamb, [King County has big racial disparities in coronavirus cases and deaths, according to public-health data](#), *Seattle Times*, May 1, 2020.

related treatment. We urge the Senate to adopt this provision, but the program should also include this coverage for all uninsured residents, regardless of immigration status. The program for provider reimbursement for testing and treating uninsured people is also helpful, but does not fully meet the need because it does not guarantee coverage, is at the discretion of the provider, and is funded with a fixed amount of money.

We also support strengthening the health care safety net, including the community health system infrastructure, access to behavioral health services, and funding for outreach to these populations. Combined with the above recommendations to ensure eligibility and affordability, these steps will do much to protect vulnerable adults and will likely dampen the COVID-19 curve.

- **Increase Premium Assistance Funding**

Washington's Health Benefit Exchange surveyed 2017 customers who chose not to renew in 2018 and found that 35 percent dropped their coverage because it was too expensive. As people lose their employer-sponsored coverage, access to affordable coverage on the individual market becomes even more important. More generous premium assistance would make insurance more affordable and encourage consumers to purchase and maintain coverage. ***Congress should increase premium assistance available for low-income and middle-income residents who purchase coverage through the Health Benefit Exchange.***

- **Fix the Family Glitch**

An Affordable Care Act rule prevents children and spouses of employees from accessing premium subsidies in the individual market when dependents can be covered by the employee's employer-sponsored insurance, even if the employer contributes little or nothing to make dependent coverage affordable. The family glitch is a widely recognized problem that creates significant affordability problems, especially for low-income families. ***Congress can fix the family glitch to eliminate the disqualification of dependents from getting premium subsidies.***

Consumers need health insurance now more than ever but are at greater risk of losing it because of coronavirus-related job losses. We urge Congress to address these urgent needs for affordable health coverage in the next round of relief measures.

Sincerely,

Northwest Health Law Advocates
Alliance for a Healthy Washington
Children's Alliance
Community Health Network of Washington, Community Health Plan of Washington
Economic Opportunity Institute
El Centro de la Raza
Foundation for Healthy Generations

Global to Local
Hassanah
Health Care for All-Washington
Health Care Is a Human Right WA
India Association of Western Washington
Islamic Civic Engagement Project
Latino Community Fund of Washington State
Latino Educational Training Institute
Latinos Promoting Good Health
Latinx Health Board
Legal Voice
NARAL Pro-Choice Washington
Neighborcare Health
North Seattle Progressives
OneAmerica
Physicians for a National Health Program – Western Washington Chapter
Planned Parenthood Votes Northwest and Hawaii
Puget Sound Advocates for Retirement Action
Retired Public Employees Council
SEIU Healthcare 1199NW
Sheng-Yen Lu Foundation
Statewide Poverty Action Network
Washington Community Action Network
West African Community Council