

Collective Response to the COVID-19 Impact on African Americans and other Priority Populations

COVID-19 is exposing America's health inequities. This unwelcomed disease vividly highlights pervasive intrinsic characteristics of American society that lead to systematic disadvantages for African Americans and other socially and economically high-risk population groups. Preliminary data from coast to coast has suddenly cast a harsh spotlight on the pandemic's impact on African American communities across the nation. African Americans accounted for 70% of the 702 deaths in Louisiana linked to the coronavirus. New York City data show that African American rates of dying once hospitalized are twice as high as among non-Hispanic/Latino whites. Of the more than 6,600 confirmed cases of coronavirus in Chicago, 52% were African American and of the 196 deaths in Chicago linked to the disease, 67% were African American, most with underlying chronic conditions. In Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, 45% of the more than 1,500 people who had tested positive for the virus were African American and of the 68 people in the county to die from the disease, 45, or 66%, were African American.

Currently, African Americans have more of the circumstances that make it harder to survive this pandemic -deep rooted poverty, pre-existing medical issues, less access to health care, less stable employment, lack of transportation, and racial segregation – all factors that contribute to the pandemics disparate impact on African American communities. For the most part, COVID-19 did not cause these disparities, they are merely exposing existing inequities in our healthcare, educational, judicial, employment and social systems. As Dr. Camara Jones, a well-known African American physician, researcher, and public health advocate recently put it, “COVID is unmasking the deep disinvestment in our communities.”

Health equity for African Americans, and other priority populations, has not been valued in this country and the result is taking a heavy toll on our healthcare systems, our economy, our educational system and our mental health. Cumulative and vexingly synergistic disparities are perpetuated by public and private policies and practices. If the daily trauma of systemic oppression and institutional racism at places of employment, within healthcare systems, at educational institutions and within judicial systems wasn't enough, the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health, physical health, and economic well-being of our communities surely will be. African Americans have proven to be resilient and strong in the face of incredible odds but the ultimate outcomes of even the most resilient are never assured when the starting point is so close to the edge of the cliff that a tremendous fall is surely imminent.

Given this ongoing crisis and the lack of a cohesive strategy to address the root cause and direct impact of this pandemic, the undersigned organizations (representing

African American organizations whose members and work are most directly impacted by the COVID-19 crisis as well as organizations and individuals vested in health equity and justice for all) collectively demand a response from our nation's governmental agencies, corporate businesses and philanthropic institutions. The needed response must include credible, visible and coordinated leadership from within the most impacted communities in partnership with others vested in health equity and have major human and financial resources to bring to bear. The response must provide appropriate relief for communities and populations suffering the greatest burden from this global pandemic. Appropriate relief must be both comprehensive and sensitive to social and political determinants of health that would undermine our ability to completely recover from the immediate and long-term effects of this pandemic. Although there has been timely outreach to key government officials with a request for more data to fully reveal the scope and nature of what is needed in both the short and long-term, we are using our amplified, collective voice to transmit several short- and long-term strategies to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on our communities.

Immediate solutions that must be implemented include but are not limited to the following:

- Collect and distribute data on race/ethnicity and location for COVID-19, incidences, hospitalization and deaths and provide such data to African American researchers or other priority populations to best strategize ways to mitigate the spread in our communities and to ensure diversity in current vaccine clinical trials
- Provide financial and other resources directly to organizations representative of the populations impacted to mitigate the spread and expansion of the disease and to provide appropriate relief to the communities most impacted
- Provide mobile community testing and free healthcare onsite in communities most impacted by the disease

Additional short-term solutions include:

- Provide free broadband internet support to disparate urban and rural communities most impacted and least likely to have internet support to mitigate educational discrepancies
- Provide paid sick leave to those that are risking their lives for the general public
- Provide COBRA coverage for workers losing health insurance due to COVID-19 furloughs
- Immediately reduce the population in prisons and penal facilities by releasing all non-felony inmates

Long-term solutions to address current health inequities that attributed to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on priority populations include but are not limited to the following:

- Provide universal healthcare for all citizens
- Invest in healthcare workers and systems that are culturally sensitive
- Increase the federal minimum wage and the poverty threshold

- Eliminate and compensate for racist policies at the federal and state level that have segregated America's cities
- Invest heavily in pre-k and elementary education in public schools to include before and after-school care as well as healthy meals
- Revamp the judicial and penal system and remove private corporations

Representatives of the undersigned request an audience with decision-makers within involved in the social, health and economic recovery of the COVID-19 crisis. As these agencies, businesses and organizations move forward with additional legislation, strategies and/or funding opportunities to address the health and economic impact of COVID-19, it is imperative that our voices and concerns are given top priority.

