



Nonpartisan Commission of Health Leaders Calls for Building a National Public Health System

Citing the coronavirus pandemic's high death toll and other grim U.S. health indicators, the Commonwealth Fund Commission on a National Public Health System issues recommendations for action to be led by Department of Health and Human Services and Congress

NEW YORK, June 21, 2022 — The Commonwealth Fund Commission on a National Public Health System today issued a set of concrete recommendations aimed at transforming public health in the United States, to create a robust, coordinated system that better protects lives and handles health emergencies.

The nonpartisan commission, chaired by Margaret A. Hamburg, M.D., former commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, has laid out a vision for a national public health system, offering recommendations for Congress, the Biden-Harris administration, and states, localities, tribes, and territories, with four major principles:

- The federal government should lead a strong and capable national public health system.
- Congress should provide stable support matched with clear expectations for states, localities, tribes, and territories to protect the health of their populations.
- The health care system should work closely with public health agencies in normal times and during emergencies.
- The public health system should earn the public's trust.

The commissioners' findings and recommendations were informed by what it called the nation's "splintered" and often ineffective COVID-19 response, with problems compounded by stark health inequities and high rates of chronic illness that led to many unnecessary deaths.

"The United States needs a strong and effective national public health system that can improve health outcomes, advance equity, and respond to emergencies. Right now, we have a system with many cracks through which millions of Americans fall each year," said Hamburg, a Commonwealth Fund board member who has also served as U.S. Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Services for Planning and Evaluation and as New York City's Commissioner of Health and Mental Hygiene. "With a stronger system in place, we can improve health outcomes overall, reduce inequities, and ensure a stronger response to some of our major problems, like the addiction and overdose epidemic and maternal mortality, as well as other emergencies that arise."

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The Commonwealth Fund is a private, nonprofit foundation supporting independent research on health policy reform and a high-performance health system.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the many structural problems with public health in the U.S., the Commission in its report:

- Called on the Department of Health and Human Services to serve as the national nexus for building a national public health infrastructure that protects people regardless of where they live. The Commission recommends creation of a new position — Undersecretary for Public Health — who would serve as a focal point for these activities and have a clear mandate, adequate staff, and other resources.
- Called on Congress to provide reliable funding for state, local, tribal and territorial health departments — which are expert, diligent and dedicated, but chronically strapped for funds and staff. This support would be tied to requirements that all health departments meet certain basic standards (often referred to as foundational capabilities) that would be measured through a revised accreditation process. The Commission estimates the annual cost for building a public health workforce and modernized public health information system to be \$8 billion.
- Recommended that the health care system work more closely with the public health system, including by regularly sharing data during both emergency and nonemergency periods. Such coordination would build on some of the successful collaborations between the health care and public health systems seen during the pandemic.
- Recommended that public health leaders earn public trust through enhanced community engagement and shared decision-making. The Commission also encourages broad support for community-based organizations and improved communication efforts to address health literacy, misinformation, and disinformation, as well as a commitment to improved integrity and transparency in decision-making.
- Outlined steps to build a national public health system that could begin immediately and would not require new legislation.

“The recommended spending is significant, but it pales next to the cost of continued inaction, including the trillions of dollars and a million lives lost because the pandemic response was so inadequate despite heroic frontline efforts,” said Commission member Julie Gerberding, M.D., M.P.H., former director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Hamburg and Gerberding were joined on the Commission by the following nationally recognized experts in public health:

- Mandy Cohen, M.D., M.P.H., former Secretary, North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services
- Karen DeSalvo, M.D., M.P.H., M.Sc., former U.S. Assistant Secretary for Health (Acting); former National Coordinator for Health Information Technology; former New Orleans Commissioner of Health
- Joneigh Khaldun, M.D., M.P.H., Appointee, Presidential COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force; former Chief Medical Executive, State of Michigan; former Detroit Health Commissioner; former Chief Medical Officer, Baltimore City Health Department
- David Lakey, M.D., Vice Chancellor for Health Affairs and Chief Medical Officer at the University of Texas System, and Professor of Medicine at the University of Texas at Tyler Health Science Center; former Texas Commissioner of Health; past President of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials
- Ellen MacKenzie, Ph.D., Sc.M., Dean, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
- Herminia Palacio, M.D., M.P.H., President and CEO, Guttmacher Institute; former New York City Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services; former Executive Director and Local Health Authority, Harris County (TX) Public Health and Environmental Services
- Nirav R. Shah, M.D., M.P.H., Senior Scholar, Clinical Excellence Research Center, Stanford University; Chief Medical Officer, American Health Associates; former Commissioner of Health, State of New York.

The commissioners were supported by additional experts including:

- Jeffrey Levi, Ph.D., Professor of Health Policy and Management at the Milken Institute School of Public Health at The George Washington University
- Nicole Lurie, M.D., M.S.P.H., former Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- Anne Morris Reid, M.P.H., former Deputy Chief of Staff, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- Joshua Sharfstein, M.D., Vice Dean for Public Health and Practice and Community Engagement at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

“We are proud of the Commission’s work, which reflects its members’ thorough examination and deep understanding of the many public health challenges and opportunities in the United States,” said David Blumenthal, M.D., president of the Commonwealth Fund. “We hope this report will spark honest, fruitful debate and set us on a clear path to reforms that are sorely needed and long overdue.”

Additional information about the Commission can be found at

<https://www.commonwealthfund.org/about-us/public-health-commission>