

October 1, 2020

The Honorable James Clyburn
Chairman
House Select Committee on the Coronavirus Crisis
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Steve Scalise
Ranking Member
House Select Committee on the Coronavirus Crisis
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Clyburn and Representative Scalise:

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), on behalf of all local health departments across the country, would like to thank you for holding a hearing on October 2, 2020 with Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Alex Azar and for the subcommittee's continued support of the public health response to COVID-19. Our nation's nearly 3,000 local health departments have been and continue to lead on the front lines of this response with no end in sight. However, they do so despite great policy and funding challenges that have impacted their capacity and ability to scale up for the next phases of the response.

Local health departments are the chief strategists of the COVID-19 response in communities across the country. Since before the first cases were even diagnosed in the US, they have been working to prepare and protect their communities. They provide testing and contact tracing services. They monitor the health of those who may have been exposed and support them to self-isolate. They use data derived from case investigations to identify trends and hot spots that inform local policies and actions related to the primary transmission routes in their communities. On top of all of this, they are working to disseminate credible information, calm fears, and dispel myths. They are experts on their regions and understand not only the science, but also the unique needs of their communities. This expertise is critical to inform national approaches to combatting the virus, as well as to inform future phases of the response, including eventual vaccine distribution. However, this expertise is not always tapped in meaningful ways. We must ensure local health departments are at the table to ensure our federal and state policies and plans can be successful in local communities.

The governmental public health system, including local, state, and federal public health agencies, is the critical infrastructure our nation has to slow the spread of this disease, track our progress, protect particularly vulnerable populations, and preserve critical health care resources. This work is incredibly resource and time intensive, requiring strong funding, staffing, and infrastructure. Unfortunately, as this pandemic affects every corner of our nation, local health departments continue to struggle to find the resources to support their response efforts. We appreciate that Congress has appropriated specific funding to support the COVID-19 response at state and local health departments, as well as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). However, the funding has had a variable reach into local public health agencies, and more must be done to ensure that those funds are reaching the local level. Currently, CDC sends funds directly to states, territories, and only 6 large cities. The rest of the nation's local health departments are reliant upon their state to decide, if, how much, and when to send money to the local level. That has led to vast inconsistencies



across the country in the amount of funding and the speed that federal funds are making it to local health departments to support this response. Moreover, CDC does not publicly track these funds beyond their initial recipient, making it difficult to identify states where the pass-through process works well and ensure that all local health departments are receiving the funds they need to continue their critical role in this response. We need Congress and the Administration to do more to track the distribution of funds to date and ensure that future funding is designated to reach all local health departments.

An eventual vaccine holds promise for protecting people from COVID-19. Local health departments serve a vital role in the provision of essential immunization services and counseling. According to NACCHO's 2019 Profile of Local Health Departments, 88% of local health departments provide direct clinical immunization services to both adults and children.¹ Further, all local health departments play a role in other essential immunization activities, such as conducting surveillance, providing education, and developing communication campaigns to bolster immunization rates. Local public health professionals remain committed and dedicated to addressing vaccine coverage, prioritizing health equity, promoting vaccine confidence, and preparing for the anticipated COVID-19 vaccine(s). Any plan for distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine must include local health departments as key stakeholders in the strategy and planning process—not simply as sites to distribute vaccinations. Moreover, investments are needed to ensure that we can build out this level of vaccine infrastructure. NACCHO urges Members of Congress to allocate at least \$8.4 billion in funding through the CDC for immediate immunization infrastructure support, including funding designated for local health departments, to plan, prepare for, and distribute COVID vaccine.

Insufficient resources and influence are not the only challenges our members are facing. Far too many of them are facing real challenges with the politicization of the COVID-19 response. Across the country, in large metropolitan areas and rural communities, public health department officials and staff have been physically threatened and politically scapegoated. Too many have lost their jobs for trying to protect and defend the health of their community in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many others have stepped down, interrupting their careers to protect themselves and their loved ones from actual or perceived threats. Even perceived political interference with public health guidance and mixed messages at the federal level greatly impact the ability of our members to protect their communities. Federal public health guidance needs to be clear, consistent, and science-based in order to support these hardworking public servants at the local level.

NACCHO and local health departments look forward to continuing our working relationship with you in order to properly address this global pandemic that has taken far too many lives. For additional information, please contact Adriane Casalotti, NACCHO's Chief of Government and Public Affairs, at acasalotti@naccho.org.

Sincerely,



Lori Tremmel Freeman, MBA
CEO

¹ NACCHO. 2019 Profile of Local Health Departments. Retrieved September 29, 2020 from <https://www.naccho.org/resources/lhd-research/national-profile-of-local-health-departments>.