

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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HEALTH EQUITY TASK FORCE ISSUES BLUEPRINT FOR HEALTH EQUITY IN COMMONWEALTH

(Boston, MA) The legislative task force appointed on June 7, 2020 to make recommendations on health disparities made visible by the COVID-19 pandemic today issued its final report *A Blueprint for Health Equity* with recommendations that position the Commonwealth to become an equity leader in the nation.

“The Blueprint meets the challenge of this moment to address systemic inequities revealed by COVID-19,” said Task Force co-chair Michael Curry, Esq, CEO of the Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers. “The plan is informed by the many legislators, activists, patients, health care workers and task force members, who testified either orally or in writing, or graciously offered their time to speak with us about these critical issues,”

Curry went on to say, “This work is a testament to the African proverb that ‘Rivers are filled one drop at a time’”. We believe this report should serve as a catalyst to move health and racial equity forward in an historic manner, so that no resident of the Commonwealth lives a shorter life, or suffers because of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age or disability.

The Task Force is particularly proud of the **recommendations that position Massachusetts to become an “equity leader” among states** by building structures and systems that prioritize equity within state government so that we are never in this place again with the next pandemic or public health emergency. Those structures include:

- A Cabinet level secretary of Equity
- An Equity in All Policies approach where new policies are evaluated for their impact on equity
- An After Action Review of the pandemic response with an equity lens, which would be a first in the nation
- An Equity plan for investing funds from the American Rescue Plan
- Equity data and dashboards for transparency and accountability.

According to Task Force co-Chair Assaad Sayah, MD, CEO of Cambridge Health Alliance, “Bearing witness to the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic, our focus was on the immediate needs for an equitable COVID-19 response and recovery, while addressing the underlying root causes. Our aim is for the *Blueprint for Health Equity* to serve as a catalyst for concerted policy action toward health equity on a broad array of systemic and social factors that influence health.”

The report includes recommendations in five key areas in addition to the recommendations above including:

- **Strengthen Access to Quality, Affordable Health Care and Other Services** by promoting digital equity and inclusion, expanding healthcare coverage for immigrant children, advancing equitable resources for safety net hospitals, strengthening community health centers, advancing behavioral health equity, diversifying the health care workforce, reducing copays and expanding access to dental care
- **Address Social Factors in Health** by increasing food access and security, providing and increasing emergency and basic income, preventing evictions and foreclosure, supporting emergency shelter, creating access for immigrants and building “communities of opportunity”
- **Strengthen the Local and State Public Health System** by strengthening and funding local public health infrastructure and providing additional support to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health
- **Integrate Equity and Resilience into Emergency and Disaster Preparedness:** by creating a COVID-19 After Action Review (facilitated by third party experts) with an equity lens, appointing a COVID-19 After Action Equity Commission with diverse representation. While AAR’s are a standard practice in the field, Massachusetts would be the first in the nation to conduct one with an equity lens.
- **Create an Equity in All Policies approach and launch it by conducting an Equity Impact Analysis** of how Federal Funds Have Been Invested in Massachusetts and a Plan for Future Investment

The 16-member COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force received oral and written testimony from hundreds of diverse individuals and organizations at three public hearings and presentations at 14 additional Task Force meetings, as well as scanning best practices from across the nation, in developing its report and recommendations.

In all of these efforts, the Task Force recommends that the community be a partner and have a voice with state and local government in every aspect of planning and implementation of COVID-19 response, and beyond. In addition, the Task Force prioritized the need for actionable data stratified (and disaggregated) by race, ethnicity, language, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, and geographic location. The data must be relevant, transparent, and available to the public, in order to be a driver of change.

QUOTES FROM TASK FORCE MEMBERS

"I am proud to have served as a member of this task force alongside many leaders in the healthcare industry and my fellow legislators – my deepest thanks goes to Speaker Mariano for this appointment," said Rep. Tyler. "We have developed a strong blueprint for creating a more equitable public health system and addressing some of the deepest disparities that impact Black, Latino, and people of color in our Commonwealth. As we continue legislating on these issues, I call on my colleagues to look at this report and use its recommendations in order to increase equitable access to quality healthcare here in our Commonwealth."

- Rep. Chynah Tyler, Chair of the MA Black and Latino Legislative Caucus

"I'm proud to have been a part of this task force, which elevated the voices of those who have been and remain most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This report highlights many of the key policy changes we can make as a Commonwealth to prevent vast socioeconomic disparities in health outcomes now and in future public health crises. I thank the community members and advocates who made the time, and had the courage, to share with us their top priorities for the future we will build together."

- State Representative Liz Miranda

"This landmark blueprint can lead the nation in addressing the health disparities that historically have deprived underserved communities with adequate and quality health services. I commend the Task Force for going beyond its scope to highlight the exigent needs and provide us with alternative paths to remold policy and legislation for a more inclusive and healthier Massachusetts"

- State Representative Carlos Gonzalez

"COVID-19 disproportionately sickened and killed people of color in Massachusetts, and the culprit is longstanding inequities and structural racism. I am honored to have served on the COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force and I'm encouraged by the blueprint released today. I look forward to relying on our work to advance racial justice in areas that the Commonwealth has ignored or denied for far too long."

- State Senator Julian Cyr

"Complicated problems, by definition, aren't easy to solve. I am humbled by the amount of work the Health Equity Task Force put into providing the legislature with tools to take the next step towards a more equitable society, in which we can trust the fairness of our dealings with each other."

- Dr. Kiame Mahaniah
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“The battle for equitable COVID 19–related health outcomes in structurally marginalized populations (including Black, Latinx and indigenous communities) must continue for the foreseeable future. We are concerned that the frequently discussed disparities in COVID–19 infection, hospitalization and death in our communities are only widening with the lower rates of vaccination seen in communities of color and the arrival of a more transmissible delta variant. It is imperative that we frame the work recommended in our report as an enduring concern that will require sustained attention, action and accountability in the months and years to come. As we shift to a different phase of the pandemic, the recommendations of the Task Force are also timely as they provide a roadmap to reckon with the root causes of our unequal health outcomes during this pandemic (including systematic marginalization and racism) so as to build healthier and more resilient communities. While this is unfortunately unlikely to be the last task force convened to work towards equitable health outcomes for systematically marginalized and vulnerable populations in our Commonwealth, we hope that the framework our report provides--particularly the recommendation to create an executive office of Equity within the state government --will point towards a future in which the outcomes of infectious epidemics and public health emergencies are not predetermined by race or ethnicity.”

- Dr. Cassandra Pierre

ADDENDUM: LIST OF ALL TASK FORCE MEMBERS

Senate Appointees:

Michael Curry, Esq.

Task Force Co–Chair President & CEO, Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers

Senator Julian Cyr

Senator Sonia Chang–Diaz

Dr. Milagros Abreu Executive Director, President and Founder of The Latino Health Insurance Program

Dr. Cassandra Pierre Infectious Disease Physician and Assistant Professor of Medicine at Boston University

Dr. Frank Robinson Vice President, Public Health, Baystate Health

Hirak Shah Legal Counsel for Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tar

House Appointees:

Dr. Assaad J. Sayah Task–Force Co–Chair CEO, Cambridge Health Alliance; Commissioner of Public Health, City of Cambridge; Assistant Professor, Harvard Medical School

Rep Chynah Tyler Chair of the MA Black and Latino Legislative Caucus

Rep. Jose Tosado (term through January 2021)

Dr. Kiame Mahaniah CEO, Lynn Community Health Center

Dr. Myechia Minter–Jordan President & CEO, DentaQuest Partnership for Oral Health Advancement and Catalyst Institute

Jeffrey Sanchez Lecturer, Center for Public Health Leadership, TH Chan School of Public Health; Senior Advisor, Rasky Partners

Beverly Stables Health Care Policy Analyst for House Minority Leader Bradley H. Jones, Jr.

Representative Carlos González

Rep. Liz Miranda (term commenced in February 2021)

Representative Donald H. Wong Chair of the MA Asian–American Legislative Caucus