

COVID-19: HAVE WE LEARNED OUR LESSONS?

Covid-19 has clearly demonstrated that our healthcare system is not addressing the needs of the American people. From shortages of PPE, ventilators, ICU beds, medications, to lack of test kits and a plan for testing, the U.S. has failed its citizens, particularly those who are elderly, Black, Latino and Indigenous where mortality rates are twice as high as they are among white populations. Many are asking how this could have happened. Clearly the U.S. along with the rest of the world was caught completely off guard by this worldwide pandemic that hit with such force, that in a few short months more than 16 million individuals have been diagnosed with the virus and nearly 700,000 have died worldwide. The U.S. death toll is the highest in the world and continues to rise daily, compared to several countries, where the death toll and the number of cases is declining, and to countries which are continuing to surge, but at a much lower rate, because they are stricter with social distancing and wearing masks. The pandemic has also hit the nation hard, economically, and once again Black, Latino and Indigenous populations have suffered egregiously. It becomes a vicious cycle, when people are asked to social distance, while they lack resources such as food, a clean water supply, adequate housing, and basic healthcare, that precludes social distancing. As they grapple with the reality of life in America during this wrenching time, many are opting to protest their situation. We clearly cannot indict them for expressing their outrage!

From the beginning of the pandemic, we have lacked the leadership to properly address health and economic disparities and prevent this disaster from spiraling out of control. Long before the pandemic, we failed to recognize the power we were placing in the hands of big business as they sent their manufacturing overseas, taking jobs away from American citizens and leaving us vulnerable and unable to obtain the needed medical supplies, devices and medications that are essential to protect our citizens from suffering. Business interests have dominated and controlled this country far too long, at the expense of the public good. This is a lesson we cannot ignore!

Addressing Covid-19 has also informed the public of these deficiencies and of the great damage that has ensued. Now is the time for planning and action to address these issues. We need a comprehensive public health strategy that determines how to eradicate this virus once and for all. We need policies that address the inequities in our system and evens the playing field. We need strategies that protect and control the availability of critical medical supplies required to grapple with unexpected challenges. We need new legislation that corrects the dysfunction in our healthcare system and removes the enabling legislation that allows pharma, payers and healthcare institutions to destroy lives by crippling citizens with outrageous high costs of care for emergency room and hospital fees, medications and co-pays.

Large allocations of funds have been made available recently by Congress. This is providing a necessary “quick fix” to get people through the economic disaster they are dealing with, so that they can feed their families and keep a roof over their heads. Longer term, we must have a comprehensive plan that incorporates new legislation to address the disparities among various segments of the population, so blatantly pointed out by our Covid-19 experience. Specifically we need to expand affordable basic healthcare and mental health services in rural and urban America, that will better serve the people. We need to continue to support telehealth options and ensure that telehealth is included in provider reimbursement plans. We need to better manage distribution of PPE, critical medications and diagnostic testing services and foster private/public partnerships that will improve public health. Let us learn from the lessons of Covid-19 and not make the same mistakes again.