June 22, 2021

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Majority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Minority Leaders McConnell and McCarthy:

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that the nation’s public health infrastructure and workforce, long neglected, are critical to the country’s security and stability. The undersigned organizations urge you to include the Public Health Infrastructure Saves Lives Act (PHISLA, S. 674) in the infrastructure and jobs legislation to strengthen our nation’s public health capabilities. The legislation would fill long-standing gaps in public health, enable modernization of archaic technologies and systems, and build a foundation for a more effective, efficient public health response to future pandemics.

The pandemic exposed the deadly consequences of chronic underfunding of basic public health capacity. The costs can be measured in over 600,000 lives lost in the U.S. alone, the largest drop in gross domestic product since 1946,¹ trillions of dollars in response and relief funding, and the closures of thousands of schools and businesses. Health agencies were gravely outmatched by the virus, responding to the outbreak with a depleted and exhausted workforce and archaic technologies. Local health departments have lost 21 percent of their workforce capacity since 2008,² while state health agencies lost nearly 10 percent of full-time equivalent staff since 2012.³ While supplemental funding has been critical to addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, most of these are not sustainable positions. Fire departments do not eliminate firefighters and equipment as soon as a blaze is contained; yet public health follows a repeated pattern of underfunding.

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³ New Data on State Health Agencies Shows Shrinking Workforce and Decreased Funding Leading up to the COVID-19 Pandemic. ASTHO, Sept 24, 2020. [Link]
followed by supplemental funding and short-term hires, followed by retrenchment and layoffs. The result is lost expertise, failure to update neglected technologies, difficulty recruiting and retaining expert workforce, and an inability to address chronic health disparities.

PHISLA would establish a Core Public Health Infrastructure Program at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), awarding grants to state, local, Tribal and territorial health departments to ensure they have the tools, workforce, and systems in place to address existing and emerging health threats and reduce health disparities. PHISLA invests in the foundational capabilities of public health. Because public health is largely funded by disease or condition, there has been little investment in cross-cutting capabilities that are critical for effective public health. These capabilities include: public health assessment; preparedness and response; policy development and support; communications; community partnership development; organizational competencies; accountability; and equity. The legislation includes strong accountability measures through public health accreditation. The legislation dovetails with the public health workforce provisions of the American Rescue Plan (ARP), as PHISLA ramps funding up just as ARP money begins to expire.

Now is the time to learn the lessons of this devastating pandemic. We simply cannot prepare for 21st century health threats using 20th century public health tools. Congress has an opportunity to provide sustainable support to build a modern, ready public health system, rather than continue to react to disasters with short-term funding that only addresses the immediate crisis.

Sincerely,

[Signatures and affiliations]

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Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum (APIAHF)
Association for Prevention Teaching and Research
Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology
Association of American Medical Colleges
Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs
Association of Ohio Health Commissioners, Inc. (AOHC)
Association of Public Health Laboratories
Association of Public Health Nurses (APHN)
Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health
Association of SNAP Nutrition Education Administrators (ASNNA)
Association of State and Territorial Dental Directors
Association of State and Territorial Health Officials
Association of State Public Health Nutritionists
Atlantic Pharmaceuticals, Inc.
The Balm In Gilead, Inc.
Big Cities Health Coalition
Biotechnology Innovation Organization
Black Greeks in Public Health
Black Hawk County Public Health
Buffalo Trace District Health Department
California Immunization Coalition
California Hepatitis C Task Force
Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids
The Campaign for Trauma-Informed Policy & Practice (CTIPP)
Captura Biopharma, Inc.
Caring Ambassadors Program
Catholic Community Services of Southern Arizona
Catholic Health Association of the United States
Center for Advocacy for the Rights and Interests of the Elderly (CARIE)
Center for Independence of the Disabled, NY
Central California Asthma Collaborative
CHI Health Care
Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition
Children's Environmental Health Network
Children's Mental Health Network
Claire Heureuse Community Center, Inc.
Colorado Public Health Association
Colorado School Medicaid Consortium
Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service, Inc.
Common Threads
Connecticut Public Health Association
Delaware Academy of Medicine and the Delaware Public Health Association
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance
Dia de la Mujer Latina, Inc.
Dorchester County Health Department
Earth & Spirit Center
Entomological Society of America
Epilepsy Foundation
The Foundation for Sustainable Communities
Future of Life Institute
Garrett Health Department
Georgia AIDS Coalition
Georgians for a Healthy Future
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice
Grand Traverse County Health Department
Green & Healthy Homes Initiative, Inc.
George Washington University Cancer Center
Gerontological Society of America
Hawaii Public Health Association
Hawaii State Rural Health Association
Healthcare Leadership Council
Healthcare Ready
Healthy Teen Network
HIV Medicine Association
Human Rights Campaign
Illinois Public Health Association
Immunize Nevada
Immunize Ohio
Indiana Public Health Association
Infectious Diseases Society of America
Institute For Professional Education
Professional Data Analysts
Progressive Democrats of America, Tucson, AZ Chapter
Public Health Accreditation Board
Public Health Alliance of Southern California
Public Health Foundation
Public Health Institute
Research!America
Safe States Alliance
Saint Alphonsus Health System
San Francisco Bay Physicians for Social Responsibility
The Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America
Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine
Society for Public Health Education
Society for Women's Health Research
Society of Behavioral Medicine
Sound Generations
Southeastern Michigan Health Association
Southern Nevada Health District
Susan G. Komen

Tennessee Public Health Association
Texas Department of State Health Services
The Wright Centers for Community Health and Graduate Medical Education
Tigura Pharmaceuticals Inc
Trinity Health
Trust for America's Health
UMW-Greater NJ Chapter
Unite Us
University of Washington School of Public Health
Utah Public Health Association
Vermont Public Health Association
Washington State Association of Local Public Health Officials
Washington State Public Health Association
Wayne State University
Wisconsin Association of Local Health Departments and Boards
Wisconsin Public Health Association
Women's Health Institute
Wyoming Public Health Association

cc: Chair Patty Murray, Senate HELP Committee
Ranking Member Richard Burr, Senate HELP Committee
Chair Frank Pallone, House Energy & Commerce Committee
Ranking Member Cathy McMorris Rodgers, House Energy & Commerce Committee
Chair Bernie Sanders, Senate Budget Committee
Ranking Member Lindsey Graham, Senate Budget Committee
Chair John Yarmuth, House Budget Committee
Ranking Member Jason Smith, House Budget Committee