

## The Health Care Safety Net is in Danger and You Can Change That

*Your Vote is Your Voice for Health Care*

**September 30, 2020**

The mission of Community Health Centers (CHCs) is to provide comprehensive and affordable preventive and primary health care to medically underserved populations, regardless of their health insurance coverage status or their ability to pay for services – but since the Coronavirus pandemic, our CHCs are finding it hard to survive.

Since March, CHCs have been hurting and are being hit from all sides. From the closing of practice sites and significant layoffs and furloughs after the shelter-in-place orders were issued, which kept patients home and practice sites empty – and resulted in millions in lost patient service revenue – CHCs have been struggling to serve their communities' oral health, behavioral health and primary health care needs.

As the pandemic continued, these declines in patient revenue persisted and caused CHCs to make difficult financial decisions. Still, they continued to fulfill an irreplaceable role in the nation's health care delivery system, and driven by necessity they shifted more than half of their patient visits (locally 3.6 million visits annually) to telehealth and telephonic care, practically overnight. In our state alone, CHCs serve 7.2 million Californians, or 1 in 6. In San Diego County, 1 in 5 receives care at a CHC – 20% of the county's entire population.

And while Congress earmarked \$7.6 billion to fund CHCs in the Heroes Act in March, they have yet to receive their fair share of this federal relief funding. Why is this? What is the hold up? By withholding the distribution of these relief funds already appropriated by Congress, the current administration is paralyzing CHCs from serving their traditional safety net patient communities. Is there a reason this administration is intentionally withholding support from this particular population?

### **The Affordable Care Act at risk**

Compounding that assault is the impending court case to repeal the [Affordable Care Act](#) (ACA). It has loomed large as the nation has been ravaged by the Coronavirus pandemic, which has sickened 33 million globally, 7.2 million in this country resulting in more than 200,000 deaths, and cut off millions now unemployed and no longer covered

under their employer-sponsored health insurance. Here to for, alternative coverage options introduced or strengthened by the ACA, including expanded Medicaid coverage or marketplace plans, have served as an important safety-net for those who had lost coverage as a result of the pandemic.

Presently, the Trump administration's Department of Justice has taken the highly unusual position to refuse to defend the ACA in this court challenge. This position not to defend the ACA would change with the election result, if former Vice President Joe Biden, the Democratic presidential nominee and a staunch ACA backer, wins the White House. For years, Republicans have been trying to dismantle President Barack Obama's landmark health law, which eliminated pre-existing conditions as a preclusion from care, and which served to bring 23 million Americans into care, by eliminating the financial penalty for refusing coverage. Known as the individual mandate, this central argument in the case, brought primarily by a group of red states, is whether or not the entire law would become invalidated because it no longer would contain the individual mandate. The red states have argued that because Congress lowered the penalty to zero – that the individual mandate can no longer be considered a tax – it therefore renders the entire law unconstitutional. To be clear, this is an intentional effort to deprive 23 million Americans of their health care coverage, a right – long fought and hard won – not a privilege.

Most of us know someone covered by Medicaid, known as Medi-Cal, the ACA exchange, or Covered California: our expectant mothers, our children, our families, friends and neighbors living in poverty, our disabled, our developmentally delayed, and our parents and grandparents living in nursing homes. That's who we're talking about. If the ACA is repealed, how are these friends and family members going to get their care? Even if the ACA doesn't affect you directly, would you really want to see these people deprived of life-giving and life-saving benefits?

All around us, the health care safety-net is in danger of failing – but, you can change this. With 34 days to go, now is the time to stand up and protect your health care, too. Remind your legislators their job is not done. They need to act now, and commit to you their support for your health care concerns and priorities. Especially now, as we head into the peak of the flu season while the Coronavirus virus rages on.

### **Do you know where the candidates stand on health care?**

The general election on November 3 will include voting for president and vice president, one-third of the U.S. Senate, and all in the U.S. House of Representatives. State and local races will be on the ballot, too. The presidential contest alone represents perhaps the starkest choice between two competing visions for our country. President Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden hold widely divergent views on health issues, with the president's record and response to the Coronavirus pandemic likely to play a central role in the November election. A new [Kaiser Family Foundation side-by-side comparison](#) examines each candidate's positions across a wide range of key health issues, including the response to the pandemic, the ACA marketplace, Medicaid, Medicare, drug prices, reproductive health, HIV, mental health and opioids, immigration and health coverage. To be sure, click on the link to see where each stand on the health issues you care about most.

Compounding these challenges, and because of his rush to fill Justice Ginsberg's vacancy on the United States Supreme Court prior to the general election, President Trump is very close to winning the court case that could repeal the ACA and take health care away from 23 million people, **with no option, no alternative health care plan, in place for those affected.** That case is slated to be heard by the Court on November 10, just one week after the general election.

I'm concerned by these mounting challenges to provide preventive and primary health care, oral health and behavioral health care to our society's most vulnerable, especially with the behavioral health challenges brought about by the societal pressures resulting from COVID-19, often times and most among the disenfranchised, mono-lingual non-English speaking, and the uninsured working poor. We're not only talking about those we know and love, we're talking about the people we interact with on a weekly basis who provide our services: the person putting out produce in the supermarket or bagging groceries, doing hair and nails, providing childcare, house cleaning and home maintenance.

Aren't you concerned? Why do you think it's these people who are being targeted? And, are you prepared to leave your jobs to provide your family members the short and long-term care they'll need? Empty your savings accounts to pay for it? Where are they going to go for care when they get sick and CHCs are insufficiently funded?

Let me ask you: in this run-up to the election, what actions have you taken to voice your priorities and your concerns for your health care? Have you spoken with your neighbors about how their vote will impact the future of health care in the country? Have you voiced your concerns to your local lawmakers? If not - it's not too late. Perhaps we can make a difference. Crib from our over 50 letters to the administration, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Members of Congress and Congressional leadership on why funding CHCs is important to you. A quick look at our [advocacy efforts](#) will show you how.

### **Act now and plan your vote**

With 34 days until the general election, national surveys forecast record voter turnout with many saying it "really matters" who wins in November when it comes to making progress on important national issues like health care. Many Americans are concerned about voting in person in crowded voting venues, especially our senior citizens and those most at risk for contracting the Coronavirus. Who would blame them? Amid the Coronavirus pandemic, additional worries mount over the U.S. Postal Service's capacity to deliver ballots on time. But, there are many options in place to make casting your ballot early, easy.

Beginning on October 5, you may receive a general election ballot in your mailbox. All active California registered voters will automatically receive a vote-by-mail ballot for the general election. To be counted, all ballots returned by mail must be postmarked by November 3, so don't procrastinate. In addition to the mail, ballots may be returned to a secure ballot drop box location by 8:00 p.m. on November 3. And, [all San Diego Public](#)

[Library locations are serving as official Mail Ballot Drop-Off locations](#) from Tuesday, October 6, through Tuesday, November 3. Find out the local hours for yours as this may be a closer, less crowded option for you.

Several early voting locations will be available in all counties for at least four days beginning Saturday, October 31. Voting locations will offer replacement ballots, accessible voting machines, and language assistance. Any registered voter also may go to a [county elections office](#) in person to request and receive a vote-by-mail ballot. For those who prefer to vote in person, polling places will be open for four days, from October 31 through November 3. Follow this link to [find your local polling location](#). Get there early, bring a book, some hand sanitizer, and be prepared to wait, and don't forget to stand at least 6' apart and wear your mask!

In California, you can [track ballots electronically](#) - when it is mailed, received, and counted. It's never been easier. Like ordering a pizza and seeing on your phone when it comes out of the oven. Be sure to save your tracking number and be sure your vote is counted.

Finally, there's a very good chance there will be legal challenges over the results of this election, which is why your participation has never been more crucial. The Constitution, as amended, includes one date that's set in stone. On January 20, 2021, someone will take the oath of office. The time to act to preserve our health care is now.



Henry N. Tuttle  
President and Chief Executive Officer

[Health Center Partners of Southern California](#), a family of companies, includes a [16-membership organization](#) of federally qualified health centers, Indian Health Services Organizations, both urban and sovereign, and Planned Parenthood of the Pacific Southwest, collectively serving 850,000+ patients each year, for 3.6 million patient visits each year, at 160 practice sites across San Diego, Riverside, Imperial counties, with the seventh largest provider group in the region. Read our award winning [2018/2019 Impact Report](#).

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