



July 21, 2020

Dear Senator/Representative:

The COVID-19 pandemic that has swept the nation and the globe has necessitated unprecedented time and resources to address the crisis. Health and medical organizations and the doctors, nurses, physicians and public health professionals we represent have been tirelessly responding to the crisis, including by attending to patients, conducting ground-breaking research and ensuring that accurate information is disseminated to the public. We appreciate the efforts of Congress to provide funding and support for state and local health departments as they continue responding to this crisis.

In the coming months, our country will be faced with a choice. We can try and return to life as it was before, but the undersigned health and medical organizations believe that we have a better option available – to build back our country to be better than it was before the pandemic. The nation has an opportunity to make investments in programs and plans that will move our country toward ensuring that we can prepare for and prevent future public health pandemics, disasters and other emergencies, including those caused by climate change.

The nation must not only respond to the current crisis and improve preparedness to guard against future threats, it must also protect public health for the future by reducing greenhouse gases and other dangerous air pollutants at the same time. Air pollution poses a threat to the lung, heart, and developmental health of Americans, and is a particular threat to children, the elderly, and individuals with pre-existing conditions. There are also communities across the country that face an even greater threat when air pollution compounds with systemic racism and the lack of resources or pathways for individuals to speak up against polluting industries in their communities. Emerging research has also shown that long-term exposure to air pollution

increases the risk of death after contracting COVID.<sup>1</sup> Americans are facing multiple threats to their lung health all at once.

As you work to build out a national recovery plan, the undersigned health and medical organizations urge you to consider the following opportunities as a first step that will have a multitude of benefits to public health, both immediately and into the future.

### **Provide significant, long-term investment in public health infrastructure.**

For too long, our country has not prioritized long-term public health infrastructure. Building strong investments into our public health system is more important than ever as state and local public health departments continue to respond to the COVID-19 crisis while also entering a time of year where extreme events like excessive heat, wildfires and hurricanes pose significant threats to the health of millions of Americans.

We urge funding for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and state, local, tribal and territorial public health systems so they can maintain and support an adequate workforce and perform essential activities that will aid in the preparation and response of future public health crises, including the threats posed by climate change.

### **Invest in a shift toward cleaner transportation.**

In some communities, reduced traffic due to the pandemic has demonstrated the improvement in air quality that is possible if the nation makes long-term changes to decrease the number of polluting vehicles on the road. However, simply driving less does not go far enough. New data from Los Angeles shows that even with reduced traffic, unhealthy levels of ozone persist.<sup>2</sup> There are a few mechanisms already in place where increased investment would aid in the reduction of harmful emissions, including greenhouse gases, and the health risks associated with them.

- **Diesel Emissions Reduction Act** – Investments in this program have yielded \$13 in health benefits for every \$1 spent. We urge Congress to utilize this opportunity to increase that investment.
- **Mass Transit Account** – Ensuring that funding within the Federal Transit Authority goes toward energy improvements in mass transit will continue to keep more cars off the road and provide cleaner air, particularly as transit ridership increases when the risk from COVID-19 declines.
- **Congestion & Mitigation Air Quality Program** – Increasing funding for CMAQ will help more states and localities reduce traffic congestion while improving air quality.

Long-term plans to reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from the transportation sector must include a transition to electric vehicles. Creating a national infrastructure of electric

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<sup>1</sup> Wu X, Nethery RC, Sabath MB, Braun D, Dominici F. Exposure to air pollution and COVID-19 mortality in the United States: A nationwide cross-sectional study, 2020. medRxiv 2020.04.05.20054502; doi: <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.04.05.20054502>

<sup>2</sup> Kahn, Debra. "Ozone Hit 5-Year High in Los Angeles Region despite Plummeting Traffic." Politico PRO, June 5, 2020. <https://www.politico.com/states/california/story/2020/06/05/ozone-hit-5-year-high-in-los-angeles-region-despite-plummeting-traffic-1291390#:~:text=>

vehicle charging stations could remove a large barrier to more Americans driving electric vehicles, reducing the reliance on more polluting engines.

In addition to the transition to zero-emissions vehicles, communities need alternative forms of transportation. Funding projects that increase access to mass transit, pedestrian-friendly community development, and expanded opportunities for walking and biking for residents of all incomes will reduce the dependence on vehicles and improve public health.

**Incentivize the switch to clean, renewable energy.**

Switching to clean, renewable, non-combustion-based electricity is critical for protecting public health from air pollution and climate change. Supporting tax credits to incentivize wind and solar energy, energy efficiency, energy storage and electric vehicles is crucial. Additionally, tax incentives for the clean energy sector will have immediate benefits on an industry that was one of the fastest growing economic sectors but has lost jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Reject efforts to roll back key health protections.**

No doubt there will be a cacophony of requests and ideas that Congress will receive over the best ways to move forward. **We ask that any actions taken to create a post-COVID-19 world do not weaken the Clean Air Act or its authority granted to the Environmental Protection Agency to regulate emissions.** At a time when Americans are facing multiple threats to their lung health at once, it is more important than ever that we do not eliminate key health protections.

The undersigned health and medical organizations look forward to working with Congress toward a plan that doesn't just return the country to business as usual, but strives to build back better, stronger and more equitably than before, ensuring a safe and healthy life for all Americans.

Sincerely,

Allergy & Asthma Network

Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments

American College of Physicians

American Lung Association

American Public Health Association

American Thoracic Society

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America

Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health

Center for Climate Change & Health

Children's Environmental Health Network

Climate for Health

Health Care Without Harm

International Society for Environmental Epidemiology -- North American Chapter

National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners

National League for Nursing

Physicians for Social Responsibility

The Society for Public Health Education

Trust for America's Health