

CAMPAIGN FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

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An Open Letter regarding prevention and wellness funding in the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act.

An Ounce of Prevention Creates a Pound of Stimulus

It is well understood that our nation's public health system has been significantly eroded in recent years, and even recent investments in preparedness are on the wane. At the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the lead federal agency responsible for coordinating prevention efforts, years of budget cuts and level funding have reduced its buying power significantly. Other federal agencies undertaking important public health work have suffered similar cutbacks. The potential for a widespread deterioration of our nation's health protection system is real.

Worsening this erosion are the more recent state budget shortfalls caused by the faltering economy. A 2008 survey by the National Association of County and City Health Officials found that approximately half of local health departments lost a total of 7,000 staff to due attrition or lay-offs. The full impact of this economic crisis is still looming.

Over-extended and under-recognized, public health workers continue to monitor and combat illnesses such as measles, diabetes and tuberculosis. Public health officials also help prevent avoidable childhood injuries, detect food poisoning outbreaks, vaccinate children, battle preventable chronic diseases, protect the safety of our water and work to stop the spread of infectious disease. They also respond to natural disasters and acts of terrorism while protecting our borders from traveling pathogens such as SARS. The list goes on. The importance of their work is easy to recognize.

The Obama Administration and congressional champions such as Senator Ted Kennedy and Senator Tom Harkin have supported efforts to restore and strengthen our nation's public health system. They are joined by many others in Congress on both sides of the political spectrum who would like our nation's health system to strengthen prevention and wellness efforts. Public health advocates applauded last week when \$3 billion in funding for prevention programs was passed as part of the House of Representative's version of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. They were overjoyed when more than \$5 billion was included in the Senate version of the same bill before it went to the Senate floor for debate.

Unfortunately, some in Congress still do not fully appreciate our public health system's unstable footing due to budget cuts at the state and federal levels. Nor do they seem to recognize the far-reaching economic benefits of prevention and wellness funding.

During the debate over the economic recovery package in the Senate, all prevention and wellness funding was stripped out of the bill. Senate moderates -- whose votes were needed to pass the recovery bill -- argued that these dollars did not create jobs and did not belong in the legislation. Public health leaders argued vociferously against that assertion, concerned that eliminating public health funding will cause further job losses in the public health sector and will dramatically erode the delicate infrastructure protecting the public's health. Others argued that failing to prevent illness could further weigh down our fragile economy.

There is a direct connection between economic stimulus and public health funding. According to the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, an estimated 21,000 public health jobs are at stake in our local communities -- nearly 75 percent of which are held by women. Still, public health's role in these difficult economic times goes far deeper. It includes protecting the health status of the rising numbers of those who have lost their jobs, are underinsured or who have no health insurance and are not in a position to seek preventive care. During this recession, public health can help ensure the population is healthy, productive and ready to work.

If a compromise between the House and Senate versions of the economic recovery bill fails to include significant funding for prevention and public health, Congress will have missed an important chance to help keep the workforce healthy and prevent outbreaks of costly diseases. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provides Congress with an opportunity to strengthen our nation's public health system while strengthening the economy. Congress should recognize the importance of protecting the health of all Americans by including the House-passed prevention funding in a final compromise bill.

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