

Modern Healthcare

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We need everyone's involvement to heal an ailing healthcare system

By *Lloyd H. Dean*

One of the many lessons from the ongoing pandemic is that our entire country must get actively involved in healthcare. Each of us individually can help prevent the spread of COVID-19, and all of us collectively can transform our healthcare system into one that prevents illness and helps people live healthier lives.

In the wake of this month's presidential election, the next administration will need to embrace an approach to COVID-19 that recognizes the importance of these different roles and how, together, they create a better healthcare system—and a healthier future.

Recently, the federal government's Healthy People 2030 framework documented how economic and social disparities are among the biggest obstacles to good health. And data from before the pandemic, combined with overwhelming evidence of the pandemic's disproportionate impact on communities of color, show that good health and quality care are out of reach for far too many.

Creating a stronger health system starts with acknowledging this fundamental truth: Everyone has the right to be healthy. Health should not depend on ZIP code, race, ethnicity or employment status. Neither should it depend on housing, education or economic stability. But today, it does.

We must do better.

Talk must give way to action, with systemic changes across the board—not incremental tweaks. Our nation needs a healthcare system that improves physical, social and mental health through easy access to quality care and necessary social services.

Seizing this unique moment to improve American healthcare means that healthcare providers, policymakers, insurance companies and community leaders must join business leaders, employers, educators, human service leaders and others in our communities and rethink how we help



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people stay healthy.

It means proactively tackling the underlying health and social causes of poor health—long before illness begins. It means paying more attention to outcomes instead of volumes. It means rethinking reimbursement so that health coverage pays for health and social services that keep people well.

And it means working constructively with the federal government.

Across CommonSpirit Health and the 21 states we serve, we have been working with community partners, lawmakers and health officials to rethink how we promote health, especially among the most disenfranchised. Everyone needs to understand that a fundamental part of addressing the social determinants of health is expanding access to basic needs such as affordable housing, healthy food and safe neighborhoods.

If lawmakers align health policy with a new approach to tackling medical and social needs together, we can fulfill the promise of healthcare as a fundamental right.

Our four principles are simple to say but difficult to achieve. That means the quicker

we start, the more we can achieve. "After COVID-19" will be too late. We must:

Make healthcare accessible to all. A more equitable healthcare system brings care to people instead of waiting for them to seek care when they get sick.

Treat the social causes of poor health, not just the effects. We can reduce health disparities if we target the underlying health and social causes of poor health as urgently as we treat acute medical needs. That means significant investments in affordable housing and violence prevention initiatives.

Champion universal coverage. Providers must stand firmly in support of universal coverage for healthcare. In particular, we must protect and expand Medicaid, broadening coverage for mental health needs.

Ensure that our healthcare workforce reflects our communities. A more effective health system requires a workforce that reflects the people and the communities we serve.

It shouldn't take a pandemic to open our eyes to the disparities that our healthcare system perpetuates. Now, we must meet this moment. The first step is to acknowledge that health is a basic human right. Then, when we embrace big ideas, new partnerships, and our shared humanity, we will finally create a healthcare system worthy of this nation. ●