



October 16, 2009

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama,

The historic movement of health reform legislation in Congress this week shows how far we've come as a nation in facing up to the massive, complex challenges facing our national health system. We must create meaningful, sustainable, and equitable health reform. As this legislation moves forward, PolicyLink—a national nonprofit research and action institute advancing social and economic equity—urges you to ensure that strong community prevention provisions are a fundamental component of health reform legislation.

Community prevention is critical for achieving improved health in America. Healthy American workers, thinkers, students, and families are at the backbone of a strong and productive nation, driving the economic engine that fuels America's competitiveness abroad. Yet every year, hundreds of thousands of Americans die from preventable illnesses and injuries. These illnesses and injuries disproportionately impact communities of color and low-income communities, populations that meet greater difficulties in paying for the rising costs of care. Though America spends over two trillion dollars on health expenditures, approximately 96% of which is directed at medical services, Americans still rank among the lowest in terms of health outcomes compared to other industrialized countries.

Prioritizing community prevention – particularly among the most impacted communities – is imperative to strengthening the nation. Community environments impact health in a variety of ways. Reducing toxins, ensuring access to healthy foods, providing safe places for physical activity, creating healthy and safe homes and workplaces—all have substantial bodies of research documenting their effectiveness. Place—where one lives, works, goes to school, and plays—impacts health in profound ways. Virtually all of our country's major health victories with strong health outcomes, including tobacco control, lead poisoning abatement, road safety, and reductions in access to alcohol have been achieved through environmental and community-based approaches. Prevention saves money for struggling families and distressed communities. It enhances equity, creates opportunity, and improves everyone's quality of life. Prevention is also a down payment on health care, as it reduces both public (government) and private health care expenditures.

Both the House Tri-Committee's "America's Affordable Health Choices Act," and the Senate HELP Committee's "Affordable Health Choices Act," would establish Community Transformation Grants to address the community factors that can make the difference between health and illness, particularly chronic illnesses. The bills would establish a Prevention and Public Health Fund to make sure that health reform is an investment in prevention, not just health care. In addition, the bills would establish a National Prevention and Wellness Strategy to insure the inter-agency commitment needed to support communities' efforts to enhance health and equity.

Preventable diseases are the most significant factors in increasing health care costs. We must re-orient our health care system to be about keeping people healthy and preventing disease, not just the care of those who have already become ill. Community efforts can make the difference, creating healthy neighborhood environments for all Americans.

We urge you to communicate your support for meaningful prevention provisions being included in any health reform measure that reaches your desk, including Community Transformation Grants, a National Prevention and Health Promotion Strategy, and a Prevention and Public Health Fund. Thank you for your leadership and commitment to prevention.

Sincerely,



Angela Glover Blackwell
CEO and Founder
PolicyLink