



July 8, 2020

The Honorable Chuck Grassley
Chairman
Senate Finance Committee
United States Senate
219 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Grassley,

Thank you for your leadership and work addressing health disparities. We commend the Senate Finance Committee for seeking input on bipartisan policies to reduce health disparities at this time given the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities of color and low-income communities.

Aligning for Health brings together a broad coalition of members focused on improving health and wellbeing, and an Advisory Board of individuals representing public health, mental health, nutrition, economic development, housing, and many other sectors – all in an effort to create efficient, integrated and coordinated programs to improve health outcomes for Americans.

National and state-level data suggest that serious illness resulting from coronavirus disproportionately affects people in communities of color and other vulnerable communities, due to underlying health and economic challenges.¹ In May, *The Lancet* reported that “data show that the COVID-19 infection rate is three times higher in predominantly black counties, and the mortality rate is six times higher,” and argued that “mitigating social determinants—such as improved housing, reduced overcrowding, and improved nutrition—reduces the effect of infectious diseases ... even before the advent of effective medications.”²

The pandemic has illustrated the effects that underlying health conditions and other social and economic factors have played in the morbidity and mortality of COVID-19. Many of the drivers of these health disparities in the pandemic can be traced to the social determinants of health – such as income, physical environment, housing, and social environment. According to a survey by the *Kaiser Family Foundation*, 31% of Americans say they have experienced problems paying their rent or mortgage, or for food, utilities, credit card bills or medical costs as a result of COVID-19.³ 47% of households with annual income below \$40,000 say they’ve had trouble paying their bills because of the pandemic – highlighting the significant social needs many are facing in addition to health care needs, and an indication of the pressures that will persist for many vulnerable populations as the economic impacts of the public health emergency grow.

¹ <https://www.kff.org/d7d708a/>

² [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600\(20\)30234-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600(20)30234-4/fulltext)

³ <https://www.kff.org/report-section/kff-health-tracking-poll-may-2020-health-and-economic-impacts/>



We strongly support Committee efforts to assess and discuss what actionable steps Congress can take now to improve access to, and the coordination of, public health, health care and social services both during and after the public health emergency subsidies. Improving delivery and coordination of care across public health, health care, and social service sectors will help to address upstream social factors, address unmet social needs, and improve health outcomes for all.

The members of Aligning for Health have, for several years, worked to hone our collective recommendations to support better alignment between federally funded efforts to support the social and health needs of people.

This work has culminated into a, bipartisan, bicameral proposal that has already been introduced and referred for consideration by the Senate Finance Committee. [The Social Determinants Accelerator Act \(S. 2986\)](#), introduced and led by Senator Todd Young (R-IN) and Senator Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), would take important steps toward improving the health of families on Medicaid.

This legislation is low-cost, ready to implement, and has the support of nearly 100 leading organizations.⁴ This legislation is now timelier than ever, as the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the need to quickly address health disparities that affect low-income populations and communities of color.

The Social Determinants Accelerator Act will empower communities to develop interventions, coordinate resources, and identify barriers to integrated and coordinated approaches to addressing both the health and social needs of families and individuals on Medicaid. It will combine targeted technical assistance with grant funding to accelerate the capacity of states and localities to design Social Determinants Accelerator Plans.

Social Determinants Accelerator Plans will identify and accelerate cross-sector approaches to addressing social determinants, which may be implemented by braiding of federal, state, and local funding to better support non-clinical health factors – such as housing, food assistance, income, employment status, education and transportation. They will also incorporate and support the coordination of community organizations of all kinds to ensure resources are used most effectively.

Additionally, the Social Determinants Accelerator Act would create an inter-agency technical advisory council on social determinants of health. The Council would include program experts from across the federal government, including the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Labor and the United States Department of Agriculture, as well as state and local government officials, the private sector and community-based organizations.

⁴ <http://aligningforhealth.org/social-determinants-accelerator-act/stakeholders-and-endorsements/>



This council would be well positioned to identify areas how federal funding is addressing health disparities, and coordinate the effective use of federal resources accordingly.

As the Committee discusses how Congress can address health disparities during and after the public health emergency, we urge you to consider the Social Determinants Accelerator Act. States are increasingly looking to maintain the health of Medicaid beneficiaries and avoid unnecessary costs – and they are deploying social determinants of health interventions. These interventions would be strengthened by better coordination of community resources.

Thank you for your leadership and your consideration of this proposal. Please contact Chris Adamec at 202-640-5941 or cadamec@aligningforhealth.org with any questions. We look forward to working with you this important effort.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Krista Drobac". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Krista Drobac
Chair