

## **North Carolina Citizens for Public Health Legislative Priorities 2020**

Since this is the short session and after a joint Appropriations Committee meeting on Tuesday, May 26<sup>th</sup>, we were informed by Senator Harry Brown that the Legislature is looking at a \$5,000,000,000 total revenue loss and that the Appropriation Chairs are going to have to say “no” a lot in the next few months in order to have a balanced budget, we are taking a new approach to our legislative priorities. It has been made clear that the General Assembly will be focusing on providing funding to programs and services they feel are the most critical and be potentially making cuts elsewhere. Therefore, we have picked priorities that we feel will have a positive impact on the COVID-19 pandemic. We are not forgetting our 2019 priorities that were not addressed last year and hopefully they will be back on the table in 2021. If any issues are brought up in this session that are related to our 2019 priorities, we will highlight and support them.

1. Support the provision of sufficient funding for COVID treatment and tracking to:
  - a. Ensure state and local public health departments have the capacity to widely test and monitor COVID-19 cases and to conduct sufficiently complete contact tracing and immunological testing per epidemiological recommended best practices.
  - b. Ensure any individual, regardless of insurance status, can receive COVID-19 testing and treatment free of cost and to ensure that all high risk, vulnerable groups have sufficient access to quality, affordable healthcare through the removal of coverage gaps.
2. Support increased funding for food security for schools by:
  - a. Eliminating the reduced-price lunch copay of \$.40 that students who receive reduced-price lunch pay by providing \$5,000,000 in recurring funding. This funding is critical to ensuring all students receive nutritious meals and that students do not accrue “lunch debt.” The NC Alliance for Health estimates that more than 900,000 students in North Carolina now qualify for free- and reduced-price lunches and expect this number to continue to grow in the coming month.
  - b. Supporting school nutrition programs by providing additional funding to support school nutrition programs for increased costs associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, including transportation, hazard pay, PPE, and new meal service patterns. School nutrition programs are critical to ensuring all our children are fed. Many students rely on school nutrition programs for their meals. School nutrition programs are more critical now and are lacking revenue from a la carte items and paid meals that they rely on to cover their operating costs.
3. Support HB 1203 which requires local boards of education to ensure that each school is staffed by at least one full-time, permanent school nurse, and appropriates \$102 million recurring funds for this. With schools planning how to reopen this fall and function in the era of COVID-19, this is the time to address the need to have a permanent nurse in every school.
4. Support increased funding for food banks by providing funding to support food banks for the increased costs and demand associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Food banks are seeing significant increases in demand. They are also lacking volunteers, who tend to be in high-risk categories, and access to certain food items as supply chains are disrupted. Food banks need additional support to ensure they keep North Carolinians fed during this time

5. Support FIBER (Foster Infrastructure for Broadband Expansion and Resources) NC Act (HB 431) to increase access to the broadband. The bill would:
  - Authorize counties and cities to install and maintain broadband infrastructure for the purpose of leasing that infrastructure to private providers,
  - Authorize counties and cities to impose and use ad valorem property taxes to construct wireline and wireless infrastructure,
  - Allow counties to offer grants to qualified private providers of high-speed Internet to expand service in underserved areas.

With COVID-19 exposing the digital divide across the state, increasing access to broadband increases access to food, medicine, and other critical health resources as well as education.
6. Support continued funding for QuitlineNC and other cessation programs and services (currently about \$2,200,000). These programs are essential to supporting tobacco users who want to quit. With the connections between COVID-19 complications and tobacco use, cessation programs are experiencing increased demand and their services are more important now than ever.
7. Support Close the Coverage Gap by expanding Medicaid health coverage to over 400,000 North Carolinians currently in the health insurance coverage gap. Addressing this issue would help increase access to care, help bolster hospital finances, especially in healthcare deserts, and help with economic development in the state. Closing the Coverage Gap is an urgent need – it is one of the best tools our state can use right now to protect people during the COVID-19 crisis. North Carolina can protect families by expanding the Medicaid health insurance program so more people have health coverage and can get care if they become sick without worrying about large medical bills afterward. A majority of states have already taken this step. The following current bills in the legislature related to this issue are:
  - HB 1040 – Healthcare for Working North Carolinians and SB 834, Close the Medicaid Coverage Gap/Funds are both Medicaid Expansion bills sponsored by Democrats. They are not likely to pass through the legislature or receive a hearing.
  - HB 1104 – Access to Affordable Health Coverage for All – an alternative approach that would create a refundable premium tax credit to help with insurance for those in the coverage gap. This bill is unlikely to move in the current environment.
  - HB 655 – NC Healthcare for Working Families, was filed by Representatives Lambeth, White, Murphy, and Dobson in 2019 and was viewed as the most likely to move through the legislature. It was not full Medicaid Expansion as it included work requirements and monthly premiums. After a court ruling in 2020 made it less likely that work requirements would pass legal muster, Representative Lambeth publicly stated he would no longer advocate for this bill.

This is an edited list of priorities presented at the May 29<sup>th</sup> Zoom NCCPH Membership Meeting, incorporating suggestions from the meeting.