



By William Considine

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Investing in public health is vital for our children, communities and country

COVID-19 is an unprecedented challenge that has touched nearly every facet of life. The pandemic has devastated families, businesses and the overall economy. No doubt that neglect and underfunding of our public health system have contributed to the severity of the crisis.

An obvious lesson is that a robust public health infrastructure is essential to the well-being of people and the economy. We as a country must address this deficiency in order to be prepared for the next pandemic and to fulfill other unmet public health needs.

The coronavirus pandemic has illuminated vulnerabilities at the federal, state and local levels. Budgets have been cut since the 2008 recession. From 2010-2018, spending for state health departments declined by 16% per capita and for local health departments by 18%, according to Kaiser Family Foundation. Tens of thousands of state and local public health jobs nationally have vanished over that time.

Disease prevention through public health has been a resounding success, but we are losing ground. While the United States spends an estimated \$3.6 trillion annually on health, less than 3 % of that spending is directed toward public health and prevention.

Here in Ohio, the rapid spread of COVID-19 revealed weaknesses in our ability to track outbreaks, due to an outdated disease reporting system.

“This is an example, frankly, of decades of underfunding public health,” Ohio Governor Mike DeWine said in early August. “We’ve got to do a better job.”

It is vital to the national interest that we adequately fund all segments of public health. A comprehensive strategy includes investment in pandemic response, environmental health, prevention services, health equity, food safety and emergency preparedness.

We also need to value and respect the professionals who work in public health. Attacks on public health officials, including former Ohio Health Director Dr. Amy Acton, have been shocking and unprecedented during a pandemic. At least 48 state and local public health leaders across the country had resigned, retired or been fired during the first five months of the pandemic, according to Kaiser Health News and

Associated Press. Many others have been harassed and subjected to threats for doing their jobs protecting the public's health. The health and safety of Americans should not be a partisan issue. Our country needs serious, informed elected officials who will work with our health care providers to bolster our vital public health system.

A robust public health system serves people in so many important ways. It provides community-based services for chronic diseases, infectious diseases, injury and accident prevention, behavioral health, suicide, sexual health, oral health, tobacco use, substance abuse, nutrition and obesity prevention.

Services such as these make a difference not only in quality of life, but also in reducing health care costs.

A July report in Health Affairs said studies show \$1 invested in tobacco cessation and vaccination efforts saves \$2 and \$5, respectively, in health care costs. A separate collaboration found \$1 invested in chronic disease prevention programs would save \$5.50 in health care costs in five years.

Substantial investments in public health and our nation's children will make for healthier communities, which are essential for a robust and sustainable economy and a bright future. Even in this age of sharp political divisions, everyone can agree we want a strong economy and that depends on having a healthy population. The time is now to invest in our people and do the necessary work to get there together.

The time is now to invest in our people and do the necessary work to get to a bright future together.



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