How the White House Advances Health Equity for Black Americans

Black maternal health and equal COVID-19 support are among the Black health priorities of the Biden-Harris administration.

March 1, 2022 By Trent Straube

As Black History Month 2022 draws to a close and President Biden prepares for his first State of the Union Address, the White House released a detailed statement titled "FACT SHEET: The Biden-Harris Administration Advances Equity and Opportunity for Black People and Communities Across the Country."

The White House fact sheet describes numerous programs and directives that help African Americans, ranging from economic packages and antidiscrimination laws to investments in historically Black colleges and universities and efforts to reform the judicial system. And, yes, health issues are cited as well—notably, a focus on improving Black maternal health and ensuring an equitable response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"From the first day in office and every day since, the Biden-Harris Administration has taken an historic approach to advancing racial equity, including directing every agency across the whole of the federal government to address the lasting impacts of systemic racism on Black communities," reads the statement's opening. "For generations, entrenched disparities in our society and economy, at times facilitated by the federal government, have made it harder for Black Americans to have a fair shot at the American dream. Centuries of injustice and decades of disinvestment in Black communities not only undermine the American promise of equal opportunity, but also keep our entire nation from reaching its potential.

"After just one year in office, the administration has delivered real and lasting change and continues to work each day to deliver equitable outcomes and opportunity for Black Americans."

The fact sheet then lays out the ways the administration meets its goals regarding equity. Many of the polices, such as the American Rescue Plan (ARP), also known as the COVID-19 Stimulus Package, helped broad swaths of the American public and the business sector, lifting up African Americans along the way. Other federal efforts are directed specifically at Black Americans.

In addition the releasing the detailed fact sheet, the White House recently hosted an event honoring Black History Month. You can watch it in the following tweet :

Happening Now: @POTUS, @FLOTUS, @VP, and @SecondGentleman host a celebration to mark Black History Month. https://t.co/Lyo2CjZzZ6

— The White House (@WhiteHouse) February 28, 2022

Below is a section taken from the White House statement. It is titled “Improving Health Outcomes for Black Communities”:

> Facing a once-in a century pandemic that highlighted and exacerbated preexisting racial disparities in our health care system, President Biden took swift action to promote better health access and outcomes for Black families. The ARP lowered health care costs for millions of lower- and middle-income Black families and invested billions to promote equitable vaccine distribution and provide critical supplies to stop the spread of COVID-19. These policies and programs include:

- Lowering Health Care Costs. Millions of lower- and middle-income Black families enrolled in health insurance marketplaces saw their premiums lowered or eliminated as a result of the ARP and will continue to benefit through the end of 2022. Thanks to the ARP, 76% of uninsured Black Americans could find a plan for less than $50 a month…. In addition, millions of uninsured Americans gained coverage during the Administration’s 2021 Special Enrollment Period (SEP). Of those newly signing up for HealthCare.gov coverage who attested to race or ethnicity, 15% were Black Americans, up over 60% from 2019.

- Improving Black Maternal Health. The administration is also committed to improving maternal health outcomes, including addressing the unacceptably high rates of maternal mortality and morbidity that disproportionately impact Black mothers and families. The President’s FY 22 budget request includes more than $200 million to bolster Maternal Mortality Review Committees, implement implicit bias training for health care providers, and create State pregnancy medical home programs, among other actions. It also includes $6 billion for the

critical Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program to help vulnerable families put healthy food on the table and address racial disparities in maternal and child health outcomes.

- The President's plans include a historic $3 billion investment in maternal health focused on growing and diversifying the perinatal workforce, improving data collection and maternal health risk monitoring, addressing the social factors that contribute to poor maternal health outcomes, addressing substance use disorders that impact maternal health, promoting increased maternal health research, improving postpartum coverage, and better coordinating care. This includes sparking innovation by allowing states to establish maternal health homes to better coordinate health care for individuals before, during, and following birth.

- It would also require all states to provide continuous Medicaid coverage for 12 months postpartum, eliminating potentially deadly gaps in health insurance at a critical time for individuals. Currently, states are only required to provide coverage for 60 days postpartum, despite research showing that many deaths and complications occur more than 60 days following delivery.
- The Administration has already approved a number of Medicaid demonstrations to expand postpartum coverage, including in Illinois, Virginia, and New Jersey; these states will provide full Medicaid benefits for 12 months postpartum (other states have expanded to six months postpartum coverage or expanded coverage to 10 months for those with substance use disorders). The ARP gives states an easier pathway to extend coverage for pregnant women from 60 days to 12 months postpartum; the Administration is working to encourage all states to take up this option so women can get the care they need to stay healthy.

- In April 2021, President Biden issued the first ever Presidential Proclamation on Black Maternal Health Week, calling on all Americans to recognize the importance of addressing

the crisis of Black maternal mortality and morbidity.

- Further, in December 2021, Vice President Kamala Harris issued a nationwide call to action to both public and private sectors to improve health outcomes for Black mothers and their children. As part of this call to action, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services issued new guidance to help states provide 12 months (up from 60 days currently) of continuous postpartum coverage through their Medicaid programs. If every state adopted an extension—as required in the President's plans—then the number of Americans getting coverage for a full year postpartum would roughly double, extending coverage for an estimated 720,000 people in a given year. HHS [the Department of Health and Human Services] also announced plans to create a new "Birthing Friendly" hospital designation, which would be the first-ever hospital quality designation by HHS specifically focused on maternity care.

- Building the Pipeline of Black Health Care Providers. The Administration has made a historic $1.5 billion investment to help grow and diversify the nation's health care workforce and bolster equitable health care in the communities that need it most during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the years to come. This funding is supporting the National Health Service Corps, Nurse Corps, and Substance Use Disorder Treatment and Recovery programs. These programs address workforce shortages and health disparities by providing scholarship and loan repayment funding for health care students and professionals in exchange for a service commitment in hard-hit and high-risk communities. With funding from the ARP, the investment supports over 22,700 providers—the largest field strength in history for these programs and a record number of skilled doctors, dentists, nurses, and behavioral health providers committed to working in underserved communities during a moment when we need them the most. Only about 5 percent of physicians in the United States identify as Black despite the fact that Black Americans account for 12 percent of the nation's total population; over 13 percent of physicians

serving through the National Health Service Corps identify as Black.

- Ensuring an Equitable Pandemic Response. Nationwide, Black people have died from COVID-19 at 1.4 times the rate of White people. The ARP provided $160 billion for the vaccines, tests, personal protective equipment, and public health workforce needed to address the spread of COVID-19, an investment that is helping to drive down racial disparities in prevention and care. Due to the ARP and the President's other investments in equitable access to the COVID-19 vaccine, multiple studies show that the gap in COVID vaccination rates in Black Americans compared to Whites and Latinos has closed. Data as of February 2022 show that 84% of Black adults, 87% of Latinos and 85% of White adults have received at least one shot, compared to 56%, 57%, and 65%, respectively, in May 2021. Additionally:

    - FEMA [the Federal Emergency Management Agency] surged resources to vaccinate all eligible Americans, including by standing up 500 vaccine sites in underserved communities. These emergency measures have helped deliver community-based and culturally competent care. In fact, over 50% of vaccines administered at the federally run community vaccination centers went to Black Americans and other people of color, and more than 75% of people vaccinated at Community Health Centers are people of color.

    - In January 2021, President Biden signed an Executive Order on Ensuring an Equitable Pandemic Response and Recovery, creating a COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force to provide specific recommendations to the President for mitigating the health inequities caused or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and for preventing such inequities in the future. The Task force transmitted its final report to the White House Office of the COVID-19 Response in November 2021, including recommendations related to interpersonal stress linked to racism, addressing the behavioral health consequences of the pandemic in communities of color, and vaccine, testing, and therapeutics access and confidence. By the end of 2021, the

Administration had begun action on over 80 percent of the Task Force recommendations and remains committed to engaging these recommendations within the historic initiatives and programs built to promote and sustain equity across the federal government. Federal agencies are now developing implementation proposals related to the policies and priorities recommended by the Task Force, which will be submitted no later than March 10.

In related news, see “Biden Supercharges His 2016 Cancer Moonshot Program” and “President Biden Proposes New Agency for Medical Breakthroughs” and click the hashtags #Joe Biden and #Health Equity.

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