

October 7, 2020

The Honorable Joe Biden
Biden for President
PO Box 58174
Philadelphia, PA 19102

Dear Vice President Biden:

Congratulations on securing the nomination of the Democratic Party for the office of President of the United States. Regardless of the outcome of the November 3 presidential election, the public health issues facing the United States and the world are increasingly serious and complex. They will test the President's ability to communicate effectively and to bring the country and the world together to make difficult policy choices and long-term investment decisions to achieve our shared vision of improved health for everyone, everywhere.

The Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health (ASPPH) is the voice of Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH)-accredited academic public health, representing 128 schools and programs of public health. Our mission is to strengthen the capacity of our members by advancing leadership, excellence, and collaboration for academic public health. The Association is committed to assisting our national leaders in successfully addressing public health challenges and opportunities. We welcome the opportunity to prepare for you and your staff:

- Briefings and white papers on key issues of interest by faculty experts
- Personnel suggestions as you complete your transition team and identify initial federal appointees and nominees
- Details on the Association's policy agenda and its rationale.

Presidential Leadership Needed

The current pandemic crisis has revealed a devastating set of leadership failures, the addressing of which are essential if the United States is to overcome the difficult public health challenges ahead. We believe that the country yearns for federal leadership on the public health problems we face. As both a candidate and as President you have an exceptional opportunity to reshape America's public health infrastructure and to help create a new culture of health, prevention, and preparedness. The result will be improved health, a stronger economy fueled by healthy workers, a more secure country, and renewed faith in America's leadership and ability to work together on critical issues.

*ASPPH believes it is imperative that the President of the United States value **science-based decision-making** at all levels of government. Recent efforts by political partisans and others with various agendas to distort or deliberately miscommunicate scientific research must end. The politicization of science, the rejection of evidence and advice from public health officials, and the derision of government and other scientists derail economic and social progress. As the leaders of the National Academies recently wrote, "Ending the pandemic will require decision-making that is not only based on science but also sufficiently*

transparent to ensure public trust in, and adherence to, sound public health instructions. Any efforts to discredit the best science and scientists threaten the health and welfare of us all.”

To successfully lead America’s public health effort, the Association urges you and your nominees and appointees to commit to leading the nation and world in addressing public health emergencies and in creating an environment in which public health can support optimal health for our communities and our nation. We believe the country is eager for federal leadership that:

- Respects science, peer-reviewed research, and data and their use in policy and decision making
- Nominates and appoints individuals with public health training to key leadership and advisory positions
- Communicates clearly and in concert with federal agencies and key stakeholders
- Works tirelessly to restore trust in federal science agencies and to encourage and reward federal scientists who “speak truth to power”
- Promotes transparency and respects the independence of critical scientific and regulatory bodies like the Food & Drug Administration (FDA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- Respects strong international organizations focused on health and advances global engagement and collaboration
- Leads a sustained national effort to eliminate health disparities and promote social justice
- Supports an investment and regulatory agenda that reflects our nation’s values and aspirations regarding health and wellness
- Treats every person with respect, regardless of political views, and seeks to be inclusive and a unifying force.

The Challenges Ahead: Opportunities to Make a Lasting and Deep Impact

With the world’s focus on the Covid-19 pandemic, it is critical that our national leaders recognize that infectious diseases are only one of many urgent public health challenges facing America. For example, non-communicable diseases (NCDs)—chronic conditions like cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and chronic respiratory conditions—were responsible for more than 70 percent of global deaths in the years before the pandemic, and have made Covid-19 patients much more susceptible to the ravages of the virus. Regardless of the pandemic, NCDs are a challenge for all societies but are especially problematic for those in traditionally underserved communities and groups.

The Association’s policy positions (and related source documents) on various issues are available [online](#). The primary goals of the ASPPH advocacy program are to affect regulatory, legislative, and other policy issues that directly impact public health schools, programs, faculty, and students; give voice to the concerns of the academic public health community on policy issues that violate or affirm the values of our leaders, faculty, and students; and serve as a vital information resource on policy matters.

As President you will have an extraordinary opportunity to shape federal public health policy that can benefit a generation, saving lives and creating a culture of wellness. Your success will be driven by the

effective use of the Presidential “bully pulpit,” creative legislative and regulatory initiatives, and shaping the priorities of federal agencies. Areas in which you can have a major impact include:

Valuing Science and Research: We urge you to continue to value science as an input in policy making. We urge you to appoint only officials who share your appreciation for the role of research and evidence in policy. Current efforts by some to downplay the value of science as a key factor in the policy making process by censoring scientists, misrepresenting the scientific literature, and manipulating/restricting access to scientific information are intolerable. ASPPH supports the use of science and evidence to inform federal policies and emphatically opposes efforts to discredit or misrepresent scientific evidence for political gain.

ASPPH strongly condemns efforts to suppress scientific evidence and to disregard scientific studies or advice in policy making. Disregarding and/or suppressing science in policy making:

- Deprives the country of an agreed-upon set of facts from which to debate policy options
- Fails to acknowledge potential harm to public health (and their related costs) in selected policy choices
- Undermines trust in government, government employees, and policy makers
- Weakens public health surveillance that plays a vital role in alerting citizens about emerging health threats
- Restricts data that can inform and advance research
- Limits the expertise available to the country and weakens critical government institutions by pushing needed experts out of government service.

Of particular concern are the recent acts of some federal agencies, most notably the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), to censor the scientific information used in policy decisions. Under a misleading claim of “transparency,” EPA has sought to ignore or undervalue important studies that challenge corporate interests. All federal agencies should use the best available health research to set their regulatory agendas.

Valuing science and research is particularly critical when addressing the climate change issue. ASPPH intensely believes that climate change is a public health emergency, requiring urgent action to reduce carbon and methane emissions and prevent worsening effects in the future. High-quality science is essential to help the United States and the world navigate in the climate change emergency. In addition, the public health workforce must be provided with adequate resources to identify risks and develop and implement climate adaptation action plans in communities across the country that are already experiencing health harms due to climate change.

Promoting Workforce Excellence: Graduates of public health schools and programs are provided with a solid foundation in the fundamentals of public health, both as generalists and specialists, whether they pursue a career in public health or a related career in law, medicine, government, health care systems, etc. The public health curriculum imparts a broad range of skills and knowledge to help students

understand how the world works and lays a foundation for lifelong learning. Equally important, it promotes the passion and capacity to make the world work better.

Education in public health produces critical thinkers who can identify gaps in knowledge and react quickly; in an uncertain world, it is impossible to fully anticipate the future. A diverse workforce that looks like America is essential if all Americans are to be served. A strong public health workforce directly impacts the health of the overall US workforce and their families by ensuring broad adoption of programs that improve the health of all.

Currently, federal investment in public health education is woefully limited. State, local, tribal, and territorial health agencies struggle to recruit well-prepared public health workers due to low wages and high educational debt. Support for public health education is essential and can be provided through direct awards to students and loan-forgiveness programs for those who work for governmental and non-profit public health agencies and organizations. A federal scholarship program for students from underrepresented groups is essential if the public health workforce is to be representative of all Americans. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) funds almost no training awards in public health research—a long-standing oversight.

Surprisingly, more than 80 percent of people working for state and regional public health agencies have no academic training in public health. Enhanced federal support for in-service training—often developed and taught by faculty at schools and programs of public health—is essential.

Advancing Prevention Science: Prevention science is the critical foundation for a population's health and the core responsibility of public health science: to deliver discoveries that can raise the floor and the ceiling of health for all of us. Earlier investments by the NIH and CDC now provide a springboard to launch the next generation of public health science for prevention, utilizing amazing new scientific capabilities.

ASPPH strongly believes that more research dollars should be invested in prevention—a vital public good that will benefit the United States and the world. Currently, NIH and CDC fund little public health prevention research. This is a lost opportunity: There are emergent diseases that cannot be addressed solely by clinical medicine, for which prevention is the optimal or only solution.

Addressing Health Disparities and Advancing a Diverse Workforce: America's public health challenges are complex, with many biological, environmental, and social contributors. One of the most intractable public health issues are racial and ethnic disparities in health outcomes. To address these disparities effectively, we must have workforce diverse in gender, race, and ethnicity. Given its social justice focus, the public health discipline is an attractive career path, particularly for those often underrepresented in the sciences and health professions (e.g., persons from racial/ethnic minority groups, first-generation students).

Public health professionals alone, however, cannot address the many social and economic conditions (housing, employment, food security, and education) that have a major influence on individual and

community health. Addressing these social determinants of health (SDOH) is critical to promoting wellness, improving health outcomes, and controlling health care costs. Public health schools and programs are uniquely situated to help policy makers to build collaborations across sectors to identify SDOH priorities in communities and revise policies that inhibit health.

Critical to addressing health disparities is improving our nation's surveillance systems to collect data on patients' race, ethnicity, sex, age, primary language, sexual orientation, disability status, gender identity, and socioeconomic status in line with federal standards. For example, demographic data for those who were tested, infected, hospitalized, recovered, or died from Covid-19 helps the public health workforce and policy makers identify and track those with a higher likelihood of severe illness and death.

ASPPH is deeply concerned that this and future pandemics will continue to exacerbate our nation's existing health inequities. We ask you to ensure our country has the tools it needs to respond effectively in this unprecedented crisis and assist our most vulnerable populations.

Presidential leadership in promoting a diverse public health workforce and addressing social determinants of health is essential. Presidential leadership in addressing systemic racism in the United States also is essential.

Restoring America's Leadership Role in Promoting Global Collaboration: By necessity, public health is a global effort. The current pandemic illustrates that our health is directly linked to global health. As we have seen with Covid-19, infectious diseases do not respect borders. As such, it is critical that the United States continues to serve as a global leader in public health and that it participates in world organizations focused on health and wellness. ASPPH has played a key role in organizing the Global Network for Academic Public Health, a convening body for academic public health leaders from around the world to share, learn, and collaborate, in an effort to improve and protect the health of the public and planet. ASPPH and its global colleagues have called on governments to commit to a new era of openness, information sharing, and mutual support, to combat the Covid-19 pandemic and future threats to the health of the world. We have also called for a renewed commitment to global health governance, including on-going support and engagement with the World Health Organization (WHO). We urge you to support on-going US engagement with the WHO.

Promoting Public Health Solutions to America's Complex Health Challenges: There are proven public health approaches to some of the nation's health challenges that are currently being ignored or woefully underfunded. Many of these challenges and available public health interventions are detailed in the newly released [Healthy People 2030](#) report, which identifies achievable goals and objectives that can guide the action of individuals, communities, and stakeholders to improve health.

The data is shocking: More Americans die each year from opioid overdose than died in any armed conflict since the end of World War II; on average, 130 Americans die each day from an opioid overdose; and overdose is now the leading cause of unintentional injury death in the United States, surpassing motor vehicle deaths. ASPPH has promoted a series of [public health approaches](#) to the opioid abuse issue, all of which are supported by peer-reviewed research.

Many of our public health issues require long-term strategies, but regulation and legislation are critical elements of prevention and treatment efforts. Our middle school and high school students are increasingly using new tobacco products, producing a new generation of Americans addicted to nicotine. Tobacco use remains the leading cause of preventable death and disease in the United States. More than 480,000 Americans die from tobacco use each year, and more than 16 million Americans currently are living with a tobacco-caused disease. All tobacco products should be overseen by an agency with expertise in assessing health risks and experience promulgating science-based regulation.

There are numerous other issues that require public health solutions. For example, the Association has played a leading role in seeking Congressional and Presidential support for public health research into firearm morbidity and mortality prevention. Similarly, the Association has been a strong supporter of universal health insurance and health care access. Efforts to expand access must be a national priority going forward.

ASPPH has developed an investment agenda in academic public health that is largely focused in providing new research and evidence on critical health and wellness issues facing America. The investment agenda includes new or expanded programs at the NIH, CDC, the Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA), and other federal agencies. We believe that workforce preparation is a critical infrastructure investment.

"Build Back Better": America's Public Health Infrastructure: Covid-19 has ended all debate as to whether the United States has been underfunding public health and its required infrastructure. As is now evident, significant, long-term investment in public health infrastructure is critical if we are to strengthen the public health system before the next pandemic hits.

For too long, the nation has neglected basic public health capacity. More than 56,000 local public health jobs were eliminated between 2008 and 2017—nearly one quarter of the workforce. Health departments are still dependent on archaic methods of tracking diseases, including phone, fax, and paper; CDC's funding remains just above that of FY 2008, when adjusted for inflation, leaving little room to modernize, retain skilled workforce, and address emerging threats.

The importance of strong, predictable federal investment in this system is even more vital now as the economic impacts of the pandemic are felt nationwide. State and local governmental budgets, and therefore public health budgets, are likely to be devastated. This will leave our nation even more vulnerable to emerging health risks. By building the core public health infrastructure of states, localities, tribal governments, and territories, as well as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the nation will be better prepared for the next threat.

Vice President Biden, should your campaign be successful, the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health pledges to work with you and your Administration to surmount the many public health challenges facing our country. In the interim, please do not hesitate to have your campaign and transition teams contact us if we can be of assistance.

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Sincerely,



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