



CITY OF HOUSTON

Sylvester Turner

Mayor

P.O. Box 1562
Houston, Texas 77251-1562

Telephone – Dial 311
www.houstontx.gov

August 12, 2020

The Honorable Greg Abbott
Governor of Texas
P.O. Box 12428
Austin, Texas 78711

Dear Governor Abbott,

The City of Houston will soon surpass 600 lives lost to the coronavirus. Houstonians are looking to government assistance in navigating this crisis. Leadership in times of crisis can require doing things outside the norm or things that are politically unpopular in the moment. It is in this spirit I, along with our public health community, applaud you for July 2nd Executive Order mandating face coverings.

As new cases continue and summer turns into fall, the State of Texas faces a growing inequality that is disproportionately affecting our minority communities.

It is not new that Texas leads the nation in both the percentage and number of people without health insurance. In 2018, for example, a quarter of adults under 65 were uninsured in Texas. This was already a dire situation for providing access to care prior to COVID-19.

Coronavirus has made the situation worse, and more urgent. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, over 1.6 million Texans were estimated to have lost their employer sponsored health insurance this May.

Overall, nearly one in five persons in the Greater Houston area lacks health insurance. The region with the largest, most sophisticated medical center in the world has the highest uninsured rate among major metropolitan areas in the United States.

According to the Texas Medical Association, Hispanic Texans are the most likely to lack health coverage, making up 61% of the uninsured but only 40% of the population. This is especially true for Houston. A recent article in the Texas Tribune notes that:

“In the Houston region, where COVID-19 hospitalizations surged in June before beginning to decline in recent days, data released by the Harris County health department showed a disproportionate share of those requiring hospital care — as high as 65% of newly hospitalized patients during some weeks in June — were Hispanic, despite the fact they are 44% of the population.”

The uninsured population should be the focus given we are facing a highly infectious respiratory disease. Multigenerational households are prominent in these same minority communities that lack health insurance. That presents an immediate risk to vulnerable seniors.

Families USA, a nonpartisan consumer advocacy group, released a report that focused on the consequences of a lack of health care coverage and how cost can delay care. According to the report, to be uninsured for adults is “increasing the odds that, if they contract COVID-19, delays in diagnosis and treatment could endanger both them and their communities.”

These numbers are not new, as this policy debate has been ongoing since the passage of the Affordable Care Act. However, as your past comments indicated, changes must happen. Now is the time to reassess the priorities and understand clearly the consequences of inaction in expanding health care coverage.

In-person education, fall sports, and economic opportunity will all be limited by a lack of access to healthcare coverage for Texans. Medicaid Expansion would help increase that access and help limit the spread of this virus.

All told, 38 states — including Republican-led states such as Oklahoma and Missouri — have opted into the expansion. The annual return on Medicaid expansion for the State of Texas would be \$8 billion.

The reality of this pandemic should cause us to reassess our priorities. Just as the peaceful protests for racial inequality have moved the nation to a more sober perspective of inequities in policing, COVID-19 should have us reassess whether it is right - or moral - to deny health coverage to vulnerable communities.

Sincerely,


Sylvester Turner
Mayor