CED Issues Plan for Handling COVID-19 Crisis, Next Pandemic

Washington, DC, July 27, 2020...The COVID-19 pandemic exposed serious shortfalls in the US health care system that need to be fixed both to handle the current crisis and prepare for futures ones, according to a new solutions brief by the Committee for Economic Development (CED) of The Conference Board.

As outlined in US Health Care in the Pandemic, the significant shortfalls that have become clear include: the ability of the current fee-for-service system to handle the challenge; the nation’s preparedness when the pandemic began; and finally, how the system has performed given the resources we have on hand. The report provides recommendations on how to deal with the current pandemic, as well recommendations, based on lessons learned, for preparing for the next one.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed an enormous price on the US,” said Lori Esposito Murray, President of CED. “That hard-earned experience must not be squandered: We must manage the current situation intelligently and learn to minimize the costs of future outbreaks. US leadership is truly on the line as we react now and plan for tomorrow.”

The US needs a health care system with financial incentives that are realigned to focus on “population health,” according to the report, reimbursing providers for maintaining health. The current fee-for-service system proved especially problematic during the pandemic as the fee-for-service system had trouble rapidly adapting to a new disease, which pressed the health care system and added extra financial stresses as profitable services were crowded out.

To defeat the current outbreak, four steps are immediately necessary:

- **Restock and maintain the Strategic National Stockpile** with both sophisticated materials, such as pharmaceuticals and ventilators, and everyday supplies including masks, gloves, and surgical gowns. That will include ensuring that long-lived materials are usable, renewing expired items before they are needed, and developing protocols for allocating supplies where they are needed.

- **Increase testing**, which is currently insufficient to identify affected populations and track outbreaks. Improve the quality and reliability of serology testing. And invest in tracking and tracing confirmed cases and their contacts, and surge isolation capacity where needed.

- **Develop vaccines and therapeutic drugs** while both maintaining safety and achieving efficacy. Multiple vaccines will be needed for adaptability and rapid manufacture, and the best scientific judgment will be needed to choose among the many candidates.
• **Engage in regional contingency planning** to provide adequate hospital capacity, including through emergency regulatory relief as necessary.

Once the COVID-19 outbreak has been vanquished, the nation will have to undertake an evaluation of its response to the pandemic to prepare for the next one. The US should move quickly to implement six recommendations well before we face another such crisis:

• **international cooperation and openness** for necessary worldwide early warnings of incipient outbreaks. Without constant information flow around the world, the next pathogen could again arrive on our shores before the email, as this one did.

• **A well-thought-out and well-funded stockpiling policy.** The national stockpile should cover immediate, emergency national needs before surge production can begin, and beyond what private institutions and states can be asked to fund, store, and maintain. The long-term response requires both money and smart management.

• **Physical facilities for treatment**, including the possession of, or quick access to, physical facilities for treating and separating the infected, the symptomatic, and their contacts.

• **Development of new multipathogen vaccines and therapeutics** for likely future viral outbreaks. This would allow advanced stockpiling of these drugs. There is currently little financing for developing such advanced drugs, however, so the government must demand and fund such research.

• **Government leadership as a source of reliable and sound guidance** to effectively coordinate a national response and ensure that all stakeholders are working together toward the same goal.


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