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We must expand HUSKY eligibility to undocumented children and their families

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As health care providers, pediatricians and pediatric advocates, we have seen the importance of Connecticut state leadership in mitigating the spread of COVID-19. Gov. Ned Lamont's executive orders, including "Stay Safe Stay Home," "Safe Workplace Rules for Essential Employers" and limitations on social gatherings, have slowed the spread of disease, allowed our hospitals to be less overwhelmed, and have saved lives.

But there is a crucial step that has not yet been taken, despite repeated calls from hundreds of Connecticut health providers: ensuring that all of Connecticut's most vulnerable residents have access to necessary and timely health care — specifically undocumented children and their families.

There are many reasons why providing health care for the entire immigrant community will affect the health of everyone in our state. Many immigrant residents are essential workers, may be unable to adequately social distance and currently are unable or afraid to seek medical advice and attention. These inequities are likely exacerbating existing disparities as COVID-19 disproportionately affects minority groups. And if these high-risk residents are avoiding medical care and advice, they are at higher risk to develop health complications and to unknowingly spread COVID-19 to others.

We are seeing this firsthand. One young man we know, who happens to be undocumented, did not have health insurance and was afraid to seek care for fear of deportation. His care was further delayed when he finally felt ill enough to seek care at a local clinic and was unable to afford the visit. These delays and avoidances are life-threatening — not only to him but to every person he may have been exposed while his care and diagnosis were delayed. His mother is now sick with COVID-19 symptoms.

Solutions exist and are imperative for the health of our state. We need to expand eligibility for HUSKY health insurance — the state's Medicaid and children's health insurance program — to children and their families regardless of their documentation status.

Other states have led the way in recognizing the importance of supporting all their residents regardless of documentation status. In California, Gov. Gavin Newsom provided \$125 million in disaster relief for undocumented immigrants impacted by COVID-19. Connecticut can also provide essential support by delivering the health care its residents all need for our collective protection.

Critically important preventative care, including testing and early intervention for those suspected of COVID-19 infection, will save the state and its hospitals from further financial disaster and most importantly reduce the continued risk of infection, hospitalization and mortality that continues to plague our state.

Early in April, over 180 Connecticut health professionals called on Gov. Lamont to protect undocumented immigrants by expanding HUSKY eligibility. Since then, we have reached out to the governor's office twice more, now with over 240 signatories, but we have not heard a response.

We applaud Gov. Lamont's leadership in enacting measures to protect the health of Connecticut residents, but there is more that needs to be done, and time is of the essence. We ask that you join the hundreds of Connecticut health care providers in urging him to take this essential step to protect all of our state's residents and their front-line health care providers.

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