

To: Governor, Brian Kemp

From: Madison McDonald

Re: Increasing public health funding in state spending

Problem Statement:

In Georgia, public health has been critically underfunded, leaving communities across the state, particularly marginalized groups, vulnerable to poor health outcomes, preventable disease, and limited access to quality healthcare. When will it be time for Georgia to genuinely invest in public health to ensure that all Georgians have an equal opportunity to live a healthy life?

Background:

Across the world, the COVID-19 Pandemic claimed millions of lives and exposed the countless inequities and disparities that are prevalent in the United States health care system. The incidence of COVID-19 in disproportionately affected populations was higher in places where there was a lack of access to public health resources. The need for strong public health infrastructure has significantly grown, yet the overall investment in public health has declined. The appropriate funding for public health must be pursued in order to actively promote healthier environments, improve health care access, advance disease prevention, and upgrade the surveillance and contact-tracing strategies of communicable diseases.

The Georgia Department of Public Health's mission statements include preventing disease, injury, and disability, promoting health and well-being, and preparing for and responding to disasters. Without the proper support and investment, the vision of a safe and healthy Georgia will not come to fruition.

Health disparities and inequities in our state are becoming increasingly evident. Across the state, groups of people based on race, sex, and socioeconomic status are being disproportionately affected by countless issues. Maternal and infant mortality is rampant in black Americans (*America's Health Rankings* | AHR, n.d.). Georgians are avoiding care due to high costs (*America's Health Rankings* | AHR, n.d.). There has been a substantial increase in multiple chronic conditions in adults (*America's Health Rankings* | AHR, n.d.). Overall, the issues of structural racism and implicit bias are of utmost importance (Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2023). It is the overall priority for public health to address the preventable and treatable diseases of all people, and it is time that the Georgia Department of Public Health to receive the necessary funding in order to address the health of all Georgians.

Landscape

For the period of 2022-2025, you established your priorities to include: making Georgia number one for small businesses, reforming state government, and putting Georgians first. The Georgia Department of Public Health has aligned their priorities with yours. Increasing funding for the DPH would greatly increase the health and wealth of our state. Without an increase in funding allocated specifically for public health, Georgia will continue to see many marginalized groups be disproportionately affected by health issues that are both preventable and treatable. Inadequate funding will only harm Georgians. Increasing public health funding would allow public health practitioners to effectively serve their communities based on their specific needs, not the needs established on a broader scale. Public health is focused on preventing and creating interventions for diseases, both communicable and non-communicable. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, we, as a state, realized how important the work of public health professionals truly is. Increasing funding for the DPH must lie within the policy our state government establishes, so it

is time that government officials begin to view the efforts of public health with importance.

Addressing the funding for public health is not a one person job, yet it will take all of Georgia to positively impact this issue. Overall, putting in the effort to find options to address inadequate public health funding will serve our state better than anything else. The health of all Georgians must be properly invested in.

Options

For the period of 2022-2025, you established your priorities to include: making Georgia number one for small businesses, reforming state government, and putting Georgians first. I have identified three policy options that would further your goals for the State of Georgia and also target the evident health disparities by systematically increasing funding for the Department of Public Health. These policy options include considerations for all stakeholders affected.

The first of these options calls for creating a Health Equity fund by using revenue produced from excise taxes across the state. On average, Georgia collected about \$283 in yearly excise tax per capita, which is one of the lowest averages in the United States (TaxRates.org, 2024). Increasing both general excise taxes—from gasoline, cellphones, cigarettes, and sugary beverages—and alcohol excise taxes, would allow for a sufficient fund to further the work of the Department of Public Health throughout Georgia. Implementing this increase in taxes would also benefit the public health of our state, by discouraging the desire to consume alcohol, sugary beverages, and cigarettes to the public due to decreasing demand (Chaloupka & Warner, 2019). Across our state, and nation, there is an increased burden of Type II Diabetes and obesity deaths due to excessive alcohol use, and deaths due to smoking every year, all of which are all extreme public health concerns. The funds generated by this increase in taxes could go into a fund that would solely benefit the Department of Public Health and our local Health Departments. The

money could be used as seen fit by each local health department to address health disparities that are evident in their community. This option would generate a sustainable revenue stream, encourage healthier behaviors, and target resources to communities in need. The potential resistance from the affected industries and consumers must be met with the desire to improve the state of the public health sector in Georgia.

The second policy option is expanding Medicaid to leverage federal funding. The decision not to expand Medicaid has proven to be a dangerous one. In 2023, Georgia ranked 48th on health care access and affordability due to the lack of expansion on Medicaid eligibility under the Affordable Care Act (David C. Radley, 2023). Medicaid expansion would actually boost federal revenues to the state of Georgia and the enhanced economic activity would lead to increase both state and local tax revenues (Ku & Brantley, 2021). If Medicaid were expanded in January 2022, in 2025 Georgia would see a net federal revenue growth of \$3,592,000,000 and estimated gain of \$125,000,000 in state and local tax revenue(Ku & Brantley, 2021). Expanding Medicaid eligibility also ultimately increase healthcare coverage and access for Georgians, which would increase the available money for state spending on other aspects of the budget, like the Department of Public Health (“The Impact of Medicaid Expansion on States’ Budgets,” 2020). Increasing coverage for Georgians would reduce the uncompensated healthcare costs and ultimately leave more fiscal resources for more public health investments. Expanding Medicaid coverage across the state would enhance the public health outcomes for all Georgians, including marginalized groups. This change would also reduce the financial strain on the healthcare system in the state and improve the accessibility of care (Radley et al., 2023). While this contradicts your state-based health insurance policies, Georgia Access and Georgia Pathways, it would better benefit all Georgians due to the money that will be untouched for the advancement

of our state's public health resources. The potential resistance from the affected politicians and government officials must be met with the desire to improve the state of the public health sector in Georgia.

The third policy option includes maximizing federal grants which the state would receive. Actively seeking federal grants from governmental agencies like the NIH, HRSA, and CDC would lay the foundation for substantial public health funding in the future. This option calls for creating a grant-writing team within the DPH to successfully identify and apply for funding. Creating this team would not only help bring more federal funding to the DPH, but it also increases job opportunities for Georgians which is one of your main priorities for our state. Because federal grants can be complex and competitive, creating a skilled and experienced team that understands the nuances associated with applications would serve to be crucial to grant approvals. Similarly, federal grants may be specific to certain public health needs. Having an equipped grant-writing team would allow for public health concerns disproportionately affecting marginalized groups to be adequately addressed. These grants could completely change the health of all Georgians, specifically those in low-income, rural, and marginalized communities. By establishing adequate grant writing teams, the Georgia Department of Public Health can improve their funding and adequately fund local health departments who can properly address the issues prominent in their communities.

Recommendation:

Of the three policy options, I would recommend that you take immediate action drafting policy that would allow funds generated by excise taxes to be allocated into a Health Equity fund for our state. This policy option also calls for you to address legislation regarding how much tax is being placed on the items mentioned before, alcohol, cigarettes, etc. Doing so, would

undoubtedly be unpopular among industries and consumers of these products, but ultimately this option would greatly benefit the people of Georgia in a myriad of ways. This option would ultimately promote healthier behaviors that would address health concerns of our state, but it would not completely eliminate consumption. As I previously mentioned, this plan would allow for sufficient funding to go to the public health concerns that are evident throughout our state and allow local health departments to fund what is needed in their unique community. Financially, the state budget would not see change that would decrease funding in any other state department. Although this option will take longer to implement due to partisan affiliations, persistence from our state could lay the foundation for this to be an effective change for other states. This option should not be regarded as only a piece of legislation, yet this could be a groundbreaking effort that could change the entire scope of public health across the nation.

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