

Building a Just & Accessible Healthcare System

In 1966, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health is the most shocking and the most inhuman because it often results in physical death.” These words are still true in the United States where millions of people are uninsured and even more cannot afford the cost of needed medicine or health services. “Injustice in health” is felt most strongly by marginalized communities: people of color, low-income families, immigrants, disabled people, and members of the LGBTQ+ community, and results in lower life expectancy, higher maternal mortality rates, and higher prevalence of chronic diseases.

Our society, and the structural racism embedded in it, creates the social and physical conditions that shape health outcomes. These conditions -- the social determinants of health -- include housing, employment status, food security, environmental safety, educational opportunity, systemic racism, and inequality, as well as access to health care. To end health inequities, we must build both our unjust healthcare system and our unjust society anew.



Without an intentional commitment to counteract racial injustice and other systemic injustices, the COVID-19 pandemic has [made existing health disparities worse](#). Black and Latinx people, especially essential workers, and members of Native American tribes have been infected and died at higher rates than white people across the United States. This pandemic shows that our health is tied together. No one in our country can be healthy while another does not have what is needed to best protect and care for their health.

We are far from that vision of health for all. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than one out of ten adults in the United States know at least one friend or family member who had [died without needed medical treatment because they were unable to pay for it](#). For people of color, it is one out of five. This is immoral. Everyone deserves access to affordable health care and prescription drugs. We must end unjust racial health disparities in the United States and change the sinful ways our system blocks access to needed health care.

Reflection

Most religions have a period of reflection and repentance. Judaism has ten days of repentance from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. Islam holds Ramadan holy, a month of fasting and reflection.

Christians take six weeks of Lent to purposefully reflect on our human experience, our missed steps and missed opportunities, our choice to place ourselves in God's hands and be and do better.

Religions recognize the human yearning to be the better selves we know we can be.

I see Lent as a time to strip down to essentials and be honest with myself about how my life is lived and the choices that I make. For me, as a white, educated, middle class woman who is a member of a Congregation with an obligation to care for me to my death, Lent is a gift and a luxury.

Most people in the world don't live the luxury afforded to me. Most people in the world are already stripped to essentials, don't know the luxury of choices, wonder where their next meal will come from, and can only dream about a moment for rest or reflection. My work is in the healthcare field in the United States. My colleagues and I focus on the health care and mental health needs of the uninsured, underinsured, and uninsurable. For most, the grinding work of survival on a day-to-day basis is their "reflection." "I live in my car. I don't have money to do laundry." We scramble in our wallets and pockets for quarters to give her. "I take my medication every other day to stretch it." We re-distribute donated medications. "The EBT benefits for my daughter suddenly ended. We need those to live." We work with her for seven months to get them reinstated.



The healthcare system in the U.S. is broken and needs a rebuild from the bottom up. The first premise for re-building should be that health care is a human right and should be accessible to every person, period. The second premise is that to be healthy means to be as whole as you can be in mind, body, spirit, and the circumstances of your daily life.

If you are one of the many who struggle to survive every day, please know that many are working to fix things. If you, like me, don't have to worry about daily survival on a very basic level; if you, like me, have Lent as a liturgical season rather than a daily reality, then take the gift of Lent seriously. Speak truth boldly; Believe in your power to bring about change; Support NETWORK with your actions and collaboration; Insist on universal health care that is equitable and racially sensitive; Learn about the social determinants of health, and then do something, even if it is collecting quarters for the laundromat; Ask for forgiveness for past blindness to others' needs and the strength and fortitude to make a difference from now on. Health is a community effort.

Written by Sister Christine Wagner, SSJ, PhD. Sister Christine is the Executive Director of St. Joseph's Neighborhood Center.

We Pray

God of New Beginnings,
Open our ears to the Lenten refrain:
Turn again. Try again. Begin again.
Let our journey back to You be a journey toward our sisters and brothers.
Let our journey back to You be a journey of equity and justice.

God who sees all, open our eyes to the truth of systematic racism in our country.
Let us be light for the world.
God who walks in righteousness, move our feet to trample the structural racism that contributes to poorer health for our Black and brown sisters and brothers.
Let us be leaven for change.
God who created all people, wake our sleeping hearts to cherish all your children.
Let us be love for the world.

Let our journey back to You, be a journey of equity and justice.
Let our journey back to You, be a journey to our sisters and brothers.
Open our ears to the Lenten refrain.
Turn again. Try again. Begin again.

Submitted by Sister Mary Haddad, RSM; written by Carrie Meyer McGrath. Sr. Mary is President and CEO of Catholic Health Association. Carrie is Director of Mission Services at Catholic Health Association.

Take Action

As you reflect, take action to increase access to health care for people in our nation. Right now, Members of the Senate are pushing back on critical changes in the American Rescue Bill that will expand Medicaid coverage. The Medicaid provisions in the bill will help reduce racial inequities in the maternal mortality crisis, provide health coverage to people who are incarcerated, and help uninsured children in non-expansion states. The American Rescue Bill contains vital changes in the Medicaid program that moves us closer to healthcare for all. Help us begin to build a new health care system by calling your Senators.

When you call, here's what you might say:

"Hi, my name is [NAME], I am a member of NETWORK and a constituent from [TOWN]. I am calling to encourage Sen. [NAME] to support the Medicaid provisions in the American Rescue Plan. Today, the majority of uninsured children live in non-expansion states. Expanding Medicaid in the 12 remaining states is a crucial step to put our nation back on track for children's health and move closer to the day when all people in the U.S. have access to the health care they need to succeed. COVID support and Medicaid expansion will help individuals

and families get back on their feet and provide parents with help to support their children’s health, financial security, and developmental needs. Thank you”

Reflect

- How do the social determinants of health, such as housing, employment status, food security, environmental safety, educational opportunity, and racism shape an individual’s health outcomes?
- Health disparities in the United States lead to higher mortality rates for people of color and low-income individuals. What are some examples of racial or economic health disparities you have witnessed? For example, consider how far some communities must travel to reach the nearest hospital.