

Legislative Update



June 2020

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House passes HEROES Act, fifth COVID-19 emergency bill

On May 16, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions Act in a [mostly party-line vote](#). The HEROES Act, a \$3 trillion aid bill, contains emergency funding and authorizing provisions for a number of important public health provisions including testing, contact tracing, expanded paid sick days and paid leave, nutrition assistance, mental health support, worker safety and a [loan repayment program for the public health workforce](#). Because the bill was passed in a partisan manner, the bill will not be taken up by the Senate, and it is unclear as to when the Senate will consider its own version of additional legislation to bolster the efforts to combat COVID-19 and support the millions of Americans who have suffered due to the heavy economic toll the pandemic has taken thus far. After passage of the bill, [APHA issued a statement](#) voicing support for several of the key public health provisions which were included in the legislation and urging their inclusion in any future COVID-19-related emergency funding legislation. The association also called on Congress to include additional provisions to bolster the ability of the nation's public health infrastructure, at the federal, state, local, tribal and territorial level, to protect the public from the pandemic. Specifically, APHA is calling on Congress to create long-

term annual mandatory funding for CDC and state, local, tribal and territorial public health agencies for core public health infrastructure activities. This funding would support essential activities such as: disease surveillance, epidemiology, laboratory capacity, all-hazards preparedness and response, policy development and support, communications, community partnership development and organizational competencies. APHA is also asking Congress to appropriate funding in fiscal years 2020 and 2021 for the public health workforce loan repayment program authorized in the HEROES Act, to help incentivize new and recent graduates to join the governmental public health workforce, encourage them to stay in these roles, and strengthen the public health workforce as a whole. APHA and Affiliate members can contact their members of Congress to encourage them to include strong public health provisions in any future COVID-19 legislation via [APHA's action alert](#).

APHA advocates for important provisions to protect communities during COVID-19 pandemic

In addition to the provisions included in the HEROES Act, APHA has been pushing for provisions on a range of other fronts including housing, maternal and child health and the protection of vulnerable communities. To protect community access to housing, APHA joined a [letter](#) urging members to cosponsor the Emergency Rental Assistance and Rental Market Stabilization Act, which would provide \$100 billion in emergency rental and housing assistance to individuals impacted by the pandemic. On the maternal and child health front, APHA joined a [letter](#) in support of including \$100 million for the Surveillance for Emerging Threats to Mothers and Babies program in the next package, and another [letter](#) calling for \$10 million in CDC funding to protect and support breastfeeding during the pandemic.

To continue protecting vulnerable communities that are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, APHA joined a [letter to Congress](#) and [to the Department of Health and Human Services](#) calling for the CDC to update the COVID-19 surveillance system to collect data on race, ethnicity, sex, age, primary language, sexual orientation, disability status, gender identity and socioeconomic status. APHA also joined letters to Congress [requesting that Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals recipients](#) be allowed to maintain DACA work authorization during the COVID-19 pandemic, and [urging inclusion of H.R. 6561](#), the Improving Social Determinants of Health Act of 2020, in the next COVID-19 legislative response package.

APHA Executive Director Georges Benjamin testifies in front of Senate HELP Committee hearing on students safely returning to college amidst COVID-19

On Thursday, June 4, the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee held a hearing titled "[COVID-19: Going Back to College Safely](#)." APHA Executive Director Georges Benjamin, MD, was requested as a hearing witness to discuss the health considerations and interventions colleges and universities should undertake as they look at reopening this fall. Other witnesses included: Mitchell Daniels, president of Purdue University in Indiana; Christina Paxson, president of Brown University in Rhode Island; and Logan Hampton, president of Lane College in

Tennessee. Benjamin has previously appeared in front of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform as well to discuss necessary steps to stem the tide of COVID-19 and reopen the country. Read his [prepared testimony](#) submitted in advance of the June 4 hearing.

Public and environmental health organizations call for increased funding for ATSDR

On May 5, in a letter led by APHA, 33 public health, medical and environmental health organizations [sent a letter](#) to leaders of the House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies urging an increase of \$12 million for the budget of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry in FY 2021. The organizations thanked subcommittee leaders for the \$2 million increase Congress provided to ATSDR in FY 2020 and the \$12.5 million in emergency supplemental appropriations provided to ATSDR for COVID-19 preparedness and response activities.

Unless ATSDR's budget is boosted, the groups outlined a number of agency activities that would be at risk, including: the agency's ability to notify communities about toxic exposures including PFAS in drinking water; the ability to maintain the current level of funding to state grantees including efforts to prevent the public's exposure to harmful chemicals such as PFAS, polychlorinated biphenyls, mercury, lead, benzene and dioxin; and its ability to provide technical assistance to property owners, communities, and local and state governments to address hazards during redevelopment, among others. ATSDR is funded through the Interior-EPA appropriations bill, and timing for House and Senate consideration of the FY 2021 Interior-EPA appropriations bill is unclear at this point.

Organizations join in support of the United Nations and the World Health Organization

APHA joined in several advocacy efforts in support of the World Health Organization in April after a Trump administration announcement that all WHO funding from the United States would be halted pending an investigation of the global organization's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In May, APHA continued to advocate on this topic by joining an [organizational letter](#) urging Congress to increase funding to the United Nations and lift the spending caps previously imposed in 2017 on US support to the UN. At the end of May, despite hundreds of organizations and individuals urging the administration to reverse course, President Trump announced that the \$400 million in annual support to the WHO was officially being terminated. In response, APHA joined a [letter](#) opposing the action and recognizing the important role the WHO plays in responding to global health challenges such as COVID-19.

APHA and other organizations oppose HHS rule that would weaken protections against health discrimination

First proposed in 2019, the HHS proposed rule titled "Nondiscrimination in Health and Health Education Programs and Activities" would amend Affordable Care Act

nondiscrimination provisions. The open comment period for the rule was last fall. In response to news that HHS would move forward with the final rule this spring, APHA joined 277 other organizations in a [letter opposing the final rule](#). The letter outlined that the new rule would instruct hospitals and health plans that they could refuse care to patients based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and personal and religious beliefs. The denial of care could include testing and treatment for COVID-19. The letter called on Secretary Azar to not move forward with the rule or to at least delay the rulemaking process until 90 days after conclusion of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additional APHA advocacy news

Given the rapid pace of action in Washington, D.C., we wanted to highlight additional issues we have weighed in on recently. Those include:

- [Organization letter](#) to congressional leaders urging that funding for active transportation programs, including the Transportation Alternatives Program, be prioritized in any future economic stimulus legislation (May 21)
- [Organization letter](#) thanking Senate sponsors of the Strengthening the Public Health Workforce Act (May 26)
- [Organization letter](#) to congressional leaders outlining funding priorities as the U.S. begins to prepare for the allocation, distribution and administration of a new COVID-19 pandemic vaccine (June 1)
- [APHA comments](#) to EPA's TSCA Science Advisory Committee on Chemicals regarding the Draft Risk Evaluation of Asbestos (June 2)
- [Organization letter](#) to the U.S. Department of Agriculture requesting an extension of child nutrition waivers through September to support access to nutrition services for communities affected by COVID-19 (June 2)

Upcoming Webinars

Racism: The Ultimate Underlying Condition
Tuesday, June 9, 2-3:30 p.m. ET

This summer, APHA is hosting [Advancing Racial Equity](#), a webinar series taking an in-depth look at racism as a driving force of the social determinants of health and equity. This kick-off webinar will: examine racism and its historic and present-day impact on health and well-being. Presenters will identify the multiple levels on which racism operates; describe the physiological impacts of racism and discrimination on health; and explore the principles for and barriers to achieving health equity.

Register here: <https://apha.org/events-and-meetings/webinars/racial-equity/webinar-registration>

[Learn more about APHA's racism and health resources.](#)