

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the lives of children and families in New York. The global health crisis has destabilized New York's economy and health care system, and disrupted our education and social services sectors. New Yorkers have lost their jobs, incurred a reduction in hours and face tremendous economic uncertainty in the future.

Our health care system is being pushed beyond its limits. Our fragmented payment and delivery systems are ill-suited to respond to the crisis and are leaving health care consumers confused and without the care they need. Children who depended on the safety, security and opportunity offered by schools and community programs, no longer have access to the same level or quality of services. These impacts can be particularly devastating for children and families living in poverty. Many New Yorkers living in poverty may no longer be able to remain in their homes, have enough food to eat or access essential care and services.

However, all hope is not lost. New York still has sufficient resources to shore up the safety net. With respect to our health care system, Children's Defense Fund-New York (CDF-NY) recommends the following:

1. Do no harm to Medicaid and refrain from making cuts to the program. Medicaid serves 6.3 million New Yorkers, including over 2 million children. The Medicaid Redesign Team recommended \$2.5 billion in cuts to Medicaid, including cuts to programs that serve children with complex medical and behavioral health needs. New York should seek alternative approaches to balancing the budget, other than cutting vital Medicaid services.

2. Streamline Medicaid eligibility. Medicaid remains the foundation of our health care system. Nearly 50 percent of all children in New York receive comprehensive and affordable coverage through Medicaid. Most of these children are living in households earning less than 154% of the federal poverty level. In 2019, that translated to less than \$39,660 for a family of 4. Medicaid is especially important for children of color, who are disproportionately poor. Medicaid becomes even more vital during economic downturns and time of needs. Accordingly, New York should drastically streamline eligibility procedures for parents and other adults by adopting presumptive eligibility. This would eliminate perceived barriers to care and services.

3. Expand health coverage to all New Yorkers regardless of immigration status. Over 400,000 New Yorkers cannot obtain coverage because of their immigration status. Without coverage, individuals forego the care they need, jeopardizing their health and ability to work and care for their families. The State can provide coverage to all who want it by creating a state-funded Essential Plan for New Yorkers excluded from coverage due to immigration status.

With respect to economic justice, New York State should:

1. Ensure all New Yorkers have access to safe and healthy housing. While New York was quick to suspend mortgage payments on behalf of property owners, many low-income New Yorkers do not own property and will struggle to make rent payments over the coming months. Accordingly, the State must take action to ensure New Yorkers have a place to live. This may include suspending rent payments for certain families, or utilizing hotel space or college dormitories for others. Additionally, now that more children are spending more time in their own homes, it is imperative that inspections for environmental hazards like lead and asthma triggers continue and that remediation work be classified as “essential work” that is allowed to continue during the crisis. If remediation work ceases, more children may end up in hospitals for severe lead poisoning or asthma attacks.

2. Improve the state tax system for low-income and immigrant families. The state’s income tax system has long been in need of adjustments to better support low-income families. The need is now more urgent than ever. Changes needed include expanding the state Earned-Income Tax Credit, fixing the Empire State Child Tax Credit so that families with young children can access the credit and increasing the amount of the credit for everyone, and making both credits available for filers using an Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers so that immigrant families can access the credits.

3. Ensure children have access to meals previously provided in schools or child care. Before the COVID-19 crisis, more than 700,000 children in New York were food insecure. That number is only likely to increase as the crisis drags on. New York State must ensure that all children—including those living in New York City—are able to access all of the same meals previously available at school, child care or community centers. Delivery systems may need to be adjusted to provide pick-up opportunities for families or delivery to families in more remote locations. Food made available through these programs may also need to change to allow for pick-up or delivery of multiple meals to support social distancing or decreased workforce available to provide meals.

Conclusion

While some of these recommendations may require significant expense, New York has options and resources to fund these policies. These options include taxes targeted at billionaires and multi-millionaires, which could yield several billion dollars in new revenues and provide significant economic stimulus to the state economy. New York should also advocate for economic relief for state and local governments to assist with any projected shortfalls in revenues.