

Investment in children's' health is critical to their future

CT VIEWPOINTS :: by JAMES E. SHMERLING AND DAVID J. HOPKINS |
DECEMBER 21, 2020 | "EXIT CLEAN READ"



Kids are resilient.

This is a statement we often say as adults to help settle ourselves when children are forced to deal with adult issues. In reality, kids do the best they can with what they have, making it that much more important for all of us to remember they require our intentional and proactive commitment to provide them with the resources and support they need.

The year 2020 has been tough for all of us and the challenges children currently face are great. From disruptions to their education, caregivers losing jobs, and social isolation, there are no shortage of ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected young people. The good news is that we can put kids on a path to success if we all work together to make them a priority. When state leaders convene for their legislative session in January, we call upon



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them to prioritize children, particularly BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of color) as they chart Connecticut's path forward, and offer ourselves, the Urban League and Connecticut Children's Medical Center, as partners.

Investing in our State's future requires us to collectively prioritize actions that will contribute to the success of kids and families across all zip codes, and in some respects, boldly speak to the structural barriers rooted in racial inequality that has prevented it from happening sooner.

Why focus on kids? Because the resources we direct towards children represent an investment.

We know that the care we provide for infants and children early in life is critical and will have lifelong implications for their physical health, emotional wellbeing, and future success. By prioritizing our youth, advancing policies in the state budget that support their health, and increasing cultural sensitivities in care for BIPOC, we strengthen families, communities, and the state's future workforce.

It is an unfortunate reality that children growing up in low-income communities many times experience poorer health outcomes than their peers in more affluent communities. COVID-19 has made these disparities all the more stark.

Given the pandemic, children are spending more time at home than ever before and for some kids that means living in older homes that contain toxins and hazards like lead-based paint, mold, and unsafe windows and stairs that can lead kids to get sick or injured. Many families will also be faced with the choice of "heat or eat" this winter, meaning they will have to choose between paying their heating bill and going grocery shopping. Many also struggle with access to affordable and healthy foods as well as safe outdoor spaces to exercise and connect with nature.

All of these factors, often referred to as the "social determinants of health," are strong factors that impact a child's ability to grow, learn and succeed to their fullest potential. Only about 10% of a child's overall health is the result of the health care services they receive. While equity in the health care system is critically important, we must focus on building equitable and healthy communities in order for all children to thrive.

Did you know that the average time between the onset of behavioral health illness symptoms and the start of treatment for kids in Connecticut is seven years? There are many reasons for this including stigma, insufficient community resources and, unfortunately, inequity in the quality of care given to minority populations. We know that COVID-19 has only exacerbated this crisis.

Now is the time to take action to strengthen our systems of care that support children's emotional health and wellbeing.

It is essential that in 2021 Connecticut's state legislators, local leaders, for-profit and non-profit partners prioritize policies and programming that address the social determinants of health in our communities and promote health equity practices among our health care providers and systems. We must pragmatically support children in everyday life, as well as during crisis and trauma, so that they are ready for whatever the new year holds— and reserve resilience for pursuing their dreams.

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