

ALIGNING IN CRISIS: A FRAMEWORK FOR OPPORTUNITIES

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The Georgia Health Policy Center (GHPC), in partnership with the School of Public Health at George Washington University (GWU) and with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is identifying, synthesizing, and disseminating cross-sector policy and implementation opportunities that facilitate recovery from the triple crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, impacts of the 2020 economic downturn, and the ongoing impact of structural racism. The work – [Aligning in Crisis](#) — builds on [Aligning Systems for Health: Health Care + Public Health + Social Services](#).¹ Researchers from both universities are building understanding among federal, state, and local policymakers and practitioners of the core components that support health care, public health, and social sectors to effectively align to meet the goals and needs of people most affected by health inequity in ways that are built to last. The ultimate goals of both projects are the same: shared progress toward communities’ goals and needs, health equity, and racial equity.

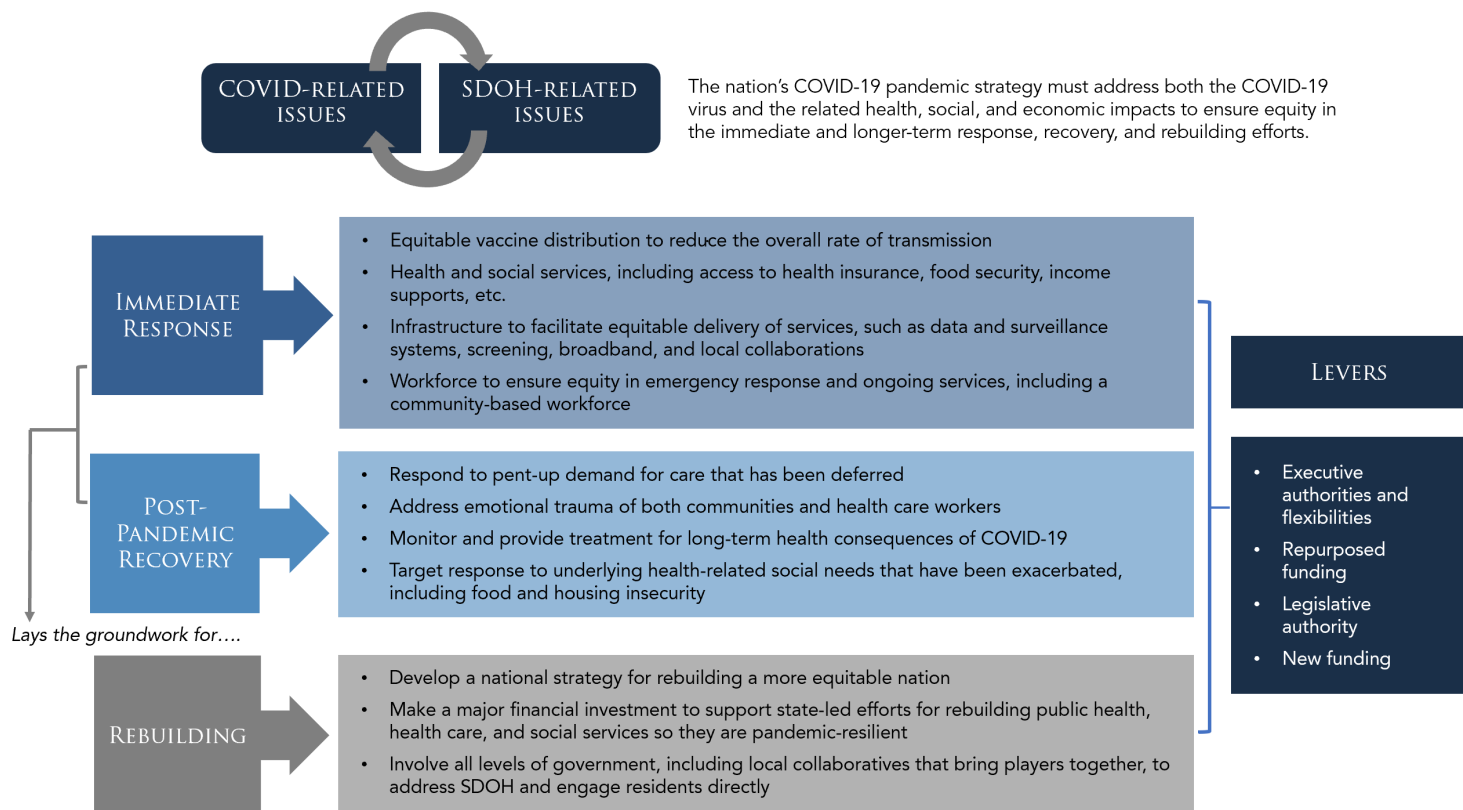
In January 2021, the GWU team released [Advancing Equity in the Nation’s COVID-19 Public Health Response and Recovery Efforts: Options for a New Administration](#).² Among other things, the paper reviews a set of administrative and legislative steps that the new administration can take to strengthen the immediate response to the pandemic and address the long-term health and social needs the pandemic has exacerbated. In fact, many of the recommendations incorporated in the options for the new administration have since been included in executive orders or are included in the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. For example, we are seeing not only a focus on addressing the COVID-19 virus but also a focus on related health, social, and economic impacts to ensure equity in the immediate and longer-term response, recovery, and rebuilding efforts. Income support, food security, housing, and workforce issues are addressed in the legislation, as is access to health insurance. This framework will assist us going forward in monitoring implementation efforts at the federal, state, and local levels.

The framework (Figure 1) lays out opportunities at three levels: immediate response, post-pandemic recovery, and rebuilding. The levels build on each other — every element of immediate response and recovery should help lay the foundation for how we might address disparities and advance equity over the long term. Central to the framework is an emphasis on equity — and the interrelationship between COVID-related issues and addressing underlying social determinants of health (SDOH).

¹ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. *Aligning Systems for Health*. Align for Health. <https://www.alignforhealth.org/aligning-systems-for-health/>

² George Washington University Milken School of Public Health. (2021). *Advancing equity in the nation’s COVID-19 public health response and recovery efforts: Options for a new administration*. <https://accountablehealth.gwu.edu/sites/accountablehealth.gwu.edu/files/AdvancingEquityinPandemicResponseandRecovery.pdf>

Figure 1. Advancing Equity in Pandemic Response and Recovery



IMMEDIATE RESPONSE

Immediate response to the pandemic began before March 2020 and is expected to last at least through 2021 as vaccines continue to be distributed and a semblance of life before COVID-19 begins to return. In this period, there are a number of considerations for policy-makers and those implementing response at the state and local levels, including how to equitably distribute vaccines; how to ensure access to health and social services; how to equitably distribute services such as data and surveillance systems, screening, and broadband; and how to support a community-based workforce that can ensure equity in emergency response and ongoing services.

Examples of local, state, and national response innovations abound. States are working with federally qualified health centers to vaccinate populations,³ and local health departments are deploying mobile care units to reach marginalized populations.⁴ Relaxation of enforcement of privacy rules during telehealth encounters⁵ and temporary rule changes for reimbursement have supported health access through telehealth in rural and other underserved areas.⁶ As schools pivoted to remote learning, school buses were converted to mobile hotspots to supply school children with reliable internet.⁷ Now, states are making an earnest effort to map areas with low or no broadband access⁸ and some are earmarking state funds, in partnership with private investment, to expand broadband access to underserved areas.⁹ This is in addition to funds for broadband support included in the CARES Act. The challenge as we move to the recovery phase is how to maintain gains made through local and federal action.

³ Riverbender.com (2021, March 4). *State partners with Touchette Regional Hospital to expand equitable distribution of vaccine in metro east*. <https://www.riverbender.com/articles/details/state-partners-with-touchette-regional-hospital-to-expand-equitable-distribution-of-vaccine-in-metro-east-48400.cfm>

⁴ Kevo Digital Staff. (2021, March 3). *Hidalgo County to host COVID-19 first dose mobile vaccine clinic*. *CBS 4 News Rio Grande Valley*. <https://www.valleycentral.com/news/hidalgo-county-to-host-covid-19-first-dose-mobile-vaccine-clinic/>

⁵ Department of Health and Human Services. (2021, January). *Notification of enforcement discretion for telehealth remote communications during the COVID-19 nationwide public health emergency*. <https://www.hhs.gov/hipaa/for-professionals/special-topics/emergency-preparedness/notification-enforcement-discretion-telehealth/index.html>

⁶ Department of Health and Human Services. *Billing for telehealth during COVID-19*. Telehealth. <https://telehealth.hhs.gov/providers/billing-and-reimbursement/>

⁷ Waddell, T. (2021, February 17). *WiFi on wheels: BOCES bus hits high gear on the internet*. *River Reporter*. <https://riverreporter.com/stories/wifi-bus,41831>

POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY

There are several important considerations for policy-makers and practitioners in the post-pandemic recovery phase. A major theme to keep in mind in this phase is regression — progress in a number of areas has actually backslid due to people retreating from daily activities. In this phase, practitioners in particular must prepare to respond to the pent-up demand for services. There must also be a greater awareness of the need to address the emotional trauma of both communities and individuals. As so-called *COVID long-haulers* struggle with recovery from the disease, surveillance and new treatments will need to be provided to those with lingering disease. The pandemic has also shone a brighter light on health-related social needs made worse during the pandemic: food insecurity, housing, transportation, and utilities.

The president's National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness begins to address several of these health-related social needs.¹⁰ Goal 6 — Protect those most at risk and advance equity, including across racial, ethnic, and rural/urban lines — addresses increased data collection and reporting for high-risk groups. It calls for strengthening the social service safety net to address unmet needs and specifically working with community-based, multisector organizations to align health and social interventions.

REBUILDING

The rebuilding phase calls for a national strategy for rebuilding a more equitable nation, making major financial investments in public health, health care, and social services so that they are pandemic-resilient, and involving all levels of government. Of special note is the need to address social determinants of health and engaging residents with lived experience directly in planning, decision-making, and budgeting. Many sections of the National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness address these areas, but this is only a start.

PUTTING THE FRAMEWORK INTO ACTION

As Congress developed the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, the \$1.9 trillion measure made commitments to support all three phases of this framework. This supported our initial review of initiatives at the local level, which showed that this framework is more a continuum rather than a set of three discrete phases. Indeed, as policymakers and practitioners at the local, state, and national levels begin to craft policies and practices that advance equity in pandemic response and recovery, they might consider this intersection using several guiding questions¹¹ that can support action:

- Which phase does the policy or practice address — immediate response, post-pandemic recovery, or rebuilding — and how does it relate to other aspects of the framework?
- What is the important social risk factor or infrastructure need that the policy or practice addresses?
- Which stakeholders are affected by the policy or practice and have their voices been amplified?
- What is the underlying, root cause of the trend?
- Where is there leverage to address the underlying cause of the trend?
- How will the policy or practice work, and what might be some of the unintended consequences?

⁸ Tibken, S. (2021, February 23). States couldn't afford to wait for the FCC's broadband maps to improve. So they didn't. *CNET*. <https://www.cnet.com/features/states-couldnt-afford-to-wait-for-the-fccs-broadband-maps-to-improve-so-they-didnt/>

⁹ Niese, M. Fast rural internet gets a big boost: Power companies to build high-speed lines in Middle Georgia. *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. https://epaper.ajc.com/popovers/dynamic_article_popover.aspx?guid=99667eab-5242-4eee-8165-57251145c19c&pbid=8e0858ee-1443-484d-9e94-f8b8a1eaaaff&utm_source=app.pagesuite&utm_medium=app-interaction&utm_campaign=pagesuite-epaper-html5_share-article

¹⁰ The United States White House. (2021, January). *National strategy for the COVID-19 response and pandemic preparedness*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/National-Strategy-for-the-COVID-19-Response-and-Pandemic-Preparedness.pdf>

¹¹ Georgia Health Policy Center. (2017, July 31). *A six-question framework for evaluating policy*. <https://ghpc.gsu.edu/download/a-six-question-framework-for-evaluating-policy/?ind=1580925370310&filename=6-Question%20Card%202017.pdf&wpdmdl=4753298&refresh=60424b7da24631614957437>