

Sacramento Bee: “Lack of health care was fatal against COVID-19, California must lead on ‘Medicare for All’”

A Dolores Huerta / Ro Khanna op-ed ran in the Sacramento Bee:

If the pandemic taught us anything, it’s that we need “Medicare for All” in California.

California has a proud tradition of leading the nation to confront injustice and live up to its ideals. We’re the birthplace of the United Farm Workers, the Black Panthers and the Disability Rights Movement. Now, California can take the lead on making health care a human right, and it can’t happen soon enough. A study earlier this year by Families USA, a healthcare advocacy group, found that [one-third of COVID-19 deaths have been linked to a lack of health insurance](#).

Gavin Newsom got it right when he was a candidate for governor. During the [first gubernatorial debate](#) in 2017, he said: “You still have 3 million people in the state of California without health insurance. And even through Covered California, millions of others have seen double-digit increases over the course of the last few years in their premiums. Single-payer is the way to go to reduce costs and provide comprehensive access.”

Now, we need Gov. Newsom to seize the moment and lead California on the path to a single-payer, Medicare for All healthcare system that would eliminate copays and deductibles and provide equal access to healthcare for everyone in the state.

A recent [analysis](#) conducted for Newsom’s Healthy California for All Commission found that if a California Medicare for All system were developed, it not only would save lives, but also would save hundreds of billions of dollars in its first 10 years of implementation.

Until now, the principal reasons we couldn’t achieve a state single-payer plan were an administration in Washington that wouldn’t permit the state to repurpose federal healthcare dollars, and a governor who wasn’t interested in bold change.

For the first time, we have a governor in Sacramento and a secretary of health and human services in Washington, D.C., former California Attorney General Xavier Becerra, who both support a publicly-run Medicare for All system.

Additionally, one of us — Rep. Ro Khanna, (D-Fremont) — has introduced legislation that would simplify how state, single-payer systems can redeploy federal dollars currently used to underwrite Medicare, Medi-Cal, Affordable Care Act plans, and other health-care programs. But even without that legislation, it’s possible to access most of those dollars without Congressional action, taking advantage of state innovation waivers and the collaborative relationship between federal and state leaders.

Gov. Newsom and Sec. Becerra, who have a long history of working together, can now help California become the first state to establish Medicare for All. They already have the authority to work on the terms of an agreement that would allow federal healthcare dollars flowing into California to be redirected for use in the new system.

Simultaneously, Newsom can focus the work of his Healthy California for All Commission on a robust public process that involves stakeholders and fleshes out how best to organize and finance a Medicare for All system that meets the needs of California's residents.

Once there is a framework for incorporating the commission's work that has buy-in from both the Biden Administration and Gov. Newsom, then it will be time for legislation to implement it.

This is the fastest track to Medicare for All, and there's precedent for it. On his first day in office, Gov. Newsom wrote to then-President Trump asking him to "empower states like mine to design and implement truly transformative solutions for securing affordable health care for all."

Since that request was made, more than 63,000 Californians have died of COVID-19, and Black and Latino Californians have been [35 percent more likely to die](#) than non-Latino whites. It shouldn't have taken a pandemic to understand that everyone's health is interconnected, and that we can only protect everyone's health if we provide everyone with quality health care.

This is the time to act. There's no time to waste.

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