

Toward a Healthy America: Prevention as Part of the Stimulus

Over the last several weeks, it's become clear that the US is in the midst of an economic crisis. This crisis affects every one of us, in terms of loss of income and savings, home foreclosures, unemployment, disinvestment, and community deterioration. While every community feels the impact, some are affected more so, and some have been distressed far longer. We must do what we can to take care of ourselves, our families and our communities. We need a community rebuilding stimulus package, in addition to the bailout for financial institutions. Prevention must be a critical element of it.

What do we want to accomplish when we stimulate?

- Job creation -- and as a result of these jobs, stimulating spending that leads to further employment
- Providing new skills in careers that can be maintained after the stimulus effort has concluded
- Investing in jobs that contribute to creating healthy, sustainable, economically strong communities
- A sensitivity to and improvement of our natural resources and environment
- An emphasis on fairness and equity that ensures that the people hurting the most get the most benefit
- And because we are spending to get out of a fiscal crisis, the ideal expenditure is an investment that, ultimately, will save us money

Though health may not initially come to mind as part of a stimulus package, health and the economy are interrelated. In fact health expenditures are a key engine of the economy. Approximately 1 in 6 dollars of our Gross Domestic Product is spent on health care, and the percentage is rising. Health is a cornerstone of a thriving and productive nation and rebuilding our economy requires a healthy workforce. Investing in better health keeps our economy moving, creating and maintaining jobs in a way that creates a result we all value and benefit from. And by investing in *community-level prevention* we can actually save money, a vital goal in our current fiscal situation. [Emerging economic models](#) demonstrate that prevention provides savings for government, families, and businesses through:

- A substantial return-on-investment in prevention—For every \$1 invested in community-based prevention, an additional \$1

more is saved within two years and the return on investment rises to \$5.60 in the fifth year.

- An investment of \$10 per person per year in programs to increase physical activity, improve nutrition, and prevent tobacco use could save the country more than \$16 billion in annual health care costs within five years.
- Investments in the communities with the poorest health and safety outcomes will contribute the greatest savings in the short, middle, and long-term.

Therefore, investments in community prevention can both provide a stimulus now (by creating local jobs when we need them) and also reduce longer term health-care costs. Without prompt and intense action, we can expect our health to decline in an economic downturn. Stressors such as unemployment and loss of savings increase chronic stress contributing to health outcomes such as poor mental health, increased rates of violence, and rising tobacco and alcohol use. According to Alameda County Public Health Director Dr. Tony Iton, “Chronic stress from the anxiety of housing instability is an issue that over time can produce elevated blood pressure, premature hardening of the arteries, Type II Diabetes and a suppressed immune system.”

We know that we are not alone in the conviction that prevention should be linked to stimulating the economy. As former Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson underscored in a recent op-ed:

There is one unexpected long-term option that can help our stalling economy – reforming our health care system through enhanced prevention and wellness...But we can't tell Americans to 'get healthy' when healthy food and fitness options are unavailable, unaffordable or not readily accessible. As a nation, we need to make sure that we have policies and practices in places that encourage Americans to make better decisions for their health...Instead of retreating in the face of adversity, my experience tells me that we have an opportunity to advance and help both our economy and our health.

What is meant by the term prevention? Prevention is attention to what can be done *in the first place*- Thompson's example of healthy food and fitness options being available underscores that effective prevention requires attention to a community environment that supports healthy behaviors. Research shows that the majority of an individual's health status is determined by a combination of the environment and behavior, with only a fraction depending on the medical treatment they receive. Of the 15 medical conditions responsible for the bulk of the increase in the nation's health costs over the past two decades, all are in part preventable through changes to the social and physical environment, such as giving people a chance to eat fresh produce or walk to work.

Quality prevention means designing, rebuilding, and bolstering our community environments to directly support health and healthy behaviors. Judging from the initial stimulus discussions in Washington DC, employment will be the first priority, and, as the lessons of solving the Great Depression taught us, many jobs created will be in rebuilding our infrastructure. Quality prevention goes hand in hand both with efforts to rebuild our infrastructure while also emphasizing green energy in ways that enhance clean air, water, and soil. As we fix our roads and bridges, we can ensure that bike paths and sidewalks are alongside; we can reduce traffic and injuries by ensuring more mass transit and maximize physical activity by building more safe parks. As we decide where to invest, we can emphasize the communities with the least resources and the poorest health



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outcomes first. Now is an ideal opportunity to address the fundamental needs that communities have long had and to achieve true equity in the allocation of resources and infrastructure.

Prevention is a different way of looking at health, one that views every decision we make as a society through the lens of health, and shifts our focus from solely treating individual patients to redesigning communities for everyone. Medical services are also critical and must be made available to everyone, and revamping communities through an investment in prevention could dramatically reduce demand for health care while extending the length and quality of life in America. This means a new role for health leaders and practitioners, ensuring that decisions and actions about our community and about our environment also take health into account. What would this look like?

- Transportation projects can improve mass transit and bicycle paths in every neighborhood
- Youth in need of jobs can be put to work growing organic vegetables
- Grocery stores can be eligible for tax breaks for locating in undeserved neighborhoods and selling food from local sources
- Park revitalization can support youth recreation and community members coming together while providing jobs to local residents
- Community residents trained to be promotoras (health promoters) can engage other residents in setting the agenda for their own communities
- Investments in regional agriculture and the preservation of farm land can lead to a more sustainable and accessible food system
- Building affordable and green housing that is close to jobs, schools, public transit and other essential services can help to develop stronger community cohesion

The real innovation is that a good solution solves multiple problems. By directing our economic stimulus and investments toward a new green economy and community health and prevention, we stand to gain healthy, thriving people and communities in a stable economy and cleaner environment. In the long-run, it's our best hope for a sustainable and equitable society. It's time to stop scapegoating. Together, we must rebuild. We *can* do this. The US has a long history of innovation, and that's what we need the most right now.

Over the next weeks and months, Prevention Institute will develop a more specific set of strategies to help inform stimulus efforts with an emphasis on improving the health of individuals, families, and communities in support of economic recovery. We invite you join us in building more support for a healthier America. We'd appreciate it if you would share this widely and also send us a note with your comments and ideas.