

# Community Health Centers Are Invaluable In The Fight Against The Coronavirus Pandemic

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*Anand Parekh, chief medical advisor for the Bipartisan Policy Center, explores how community health centers have been successfully fighting the Covid-19 pandemic in underserved communities.*



A coronavirus testing site at Roots Community Health Center in Oakland, Calif.  
HEARST NEWSPAPERS VIA GETTY IMAGES

When history recounts the U.S. response to Covid-19, there will surely be much to lament; six months into the pandemic, the U.S. accounts for over 5 million confirmed cases and over 160,000 deaths, one-quarter of the worldwide toll. However, history will also remind us of the countless health care workers, first responders, and benevolent individuals and organizations who served others in their time of greatest need. The nation's community health center network is one such entity that is made up of unsung heroes.

Born out of the nation's [Civil Rights movement](#) and launched as part of the "war on poverty," community health centers have focused on reducing health disparities and supporting the health needs of underserved communities for over 55 years. By offering comprehensive, patient-centered, and preventative care, community health centers demonstrate why universal primary care is so important to better health, better care, and lower costs. Support from both Republican and Democratic administrations over the last several decades has resulted in phenomenal growth of the program.

Consider this: Nearly 30 million Americans rely on 1,400 [community health centers](#) to provide services at more than 12,000 sites across the country. This population includes 1 in 9 children, 1 in 5 rural residents, and 1 in 3 living poverty. Vulnerable populations served

include veterans, agricultural workers, and individuals living in public housing. Most health centers provide a wide range of medical, dental, and behavioral health services. Importantly, they do so regardless of a patient's ability to pay; in fact, almost one-quarter of health center patients are uninsured and nearly half are covered by Medicaid.

Health centers have risen to the occasion during the Covid-19 pandemic having conducted over [2.6 million tests](#) to date, many through walk up or drive-up testing. More than half of all people tested and of confirmed cases have been from [communities of color](#). Health centers have also continued to serve their communities by conducting clinical visits virtually.

However, this has come at a price. Over [1,000 sites have temporarily closed](#) because of Covid-19 due to staff exposure, school closure, or other reasons. Hundreds of staff have tested positive for Covid-19 and some health centers continue to experience PPE shortages (e.g., N-95 masks, gowns). Fewer patient visits have also translated to [reduced revenue](#) leading some health centers to either furlough or reduce staff and eliminate services such as dental and vision care.

Supporting the capacity of health centers to care for patients in the near term will require adequate funding. While the [CARES Act](#) provided health centers with emergency funding and loan options for the Covid-19 response and extended the Community Health Centers Fund through the end of November, sustainable funding is needed to maintain the existing infrastructure and services for patients. For example, the Bipartisan Policy Center recently [recommended reauthorizing federal funding](#) for the Community Health Center Fund at the current level of \$5.6 billion annually, including both mandatory and appropriated funding; other [proposals](#) have called for more significant emergency and longer-term investments in community health centers, which would also support [technology upgrades and workforce programs](#). In addition, given Medicaid's outsized role in financing health centers, some [experts](#) have called for increased Medicaid reimbursements as well as advanced payments to providers.

Given the continued insufficiency of Covid-19 tests and the lag in testing (approximately two-thirds of tests conducted in health centers take [four days or longer for results](#)), it will be important that health centers obtain rapid antigen tests to quickly identify and isolate cases and allow public health authorities to perform contact tracing. Ensuring that personal protective equipment reach health centers will also be important moving forward.

Perhaps the greatest test to curb this pandemic still awaits us. Testing, manufacturing, and distributing a safe and effective vaccine will only pay dividends if we are able to successfully convince Americans to obtain it. A recent [Gallup survey](#) indicated that one in three Americans would not get a Covid-19 vaccine if one were available today at no cost. It is well known that trusted sources, such as health care professionals, can have significant influence on whether patients agree to obtain clinical services. As trusted community organizations, health centers will have an important role to play in building acceptance for a vaccine, particularly in communities of color.

Health centers represent some of the best ideals of American society – compassion, inclusion, and equality. They are not just part of the nation's health safety net; rather, they are part of the fabric of who we are as Americans. For them to continue serving the most vulnerable among us, it's important that policymakers continue to support them now and in the future.