**TITLE: Pandemic Recovery and Future Readiness: The Local Approach**

Overcoming a pandemic starts at the local level.

If the past two years have taught those in the health care space anything - it is that. Community Health Centers have been a catalyst in driving this local approach to combat COVID-19. Serving nearly 30 million people across the nation, health centers have played a central role in protecting the people who were disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

Over the course of the pandemic, health centers have administered more than 21 million vaccines and conducted 18 million tests. [INCLUDE SHOTS GIVEN BY HEALTH CENTERS IN YOUR state or local community health center]. Additionally, areas that have community health centers like [INSERT LOCAL HEALTH CENTER], [reported fewer COVID-19 deaths and infection rates](https://bit.ly/healthcentersinfographic).

However, being the cornerstone of health care support for a community goes beyond providing medical help. It also means finding solutions to infrastructural problems that prevent people from receiving and/or accessing care. For example, health centers nationwide have been providing individuals living in shared housing, or even shelters, resources to quarantine effectively - a luxury for many Americans. In [NAME OF STATE] itself, health centers helped [INSERT LOCAL EXAMPLES WHERE APPLICABLE].

Inevitably, fighting a global pandemic on the front lines of underserved communities has decimated the health center workforce. A recent survey from the National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC) [found that 100%](https://www.nachc.org/current-state-of-the-health-center-workforce/) of health centers surveyed reported losing staff in the last 6 months, with 68% (7 in 10) of CHCs losing 5-25% of their workforce. The most hard-hit category - nurses.

These shortages don’t just impact pandemic readiness in the future, but the capacity for health centers to respond to other current and/or ongoing public health crises. Additionally, the ripple effect extends beyond health centers to the communities they serve.

Most of these communities include vulnerable populations who are already disproportionately affected by the pandemic -- essential workers who harvest our food, work in factories, restaurants, or retail. Their labor fuels our economy but also places them at higher risk for exposure to COVID-19. With businesses opening back up, reduced masking mandates, and fluctuating infection rates, these workers will turn to critical health center staff for needed care. As such, it is imperative to that we invest in the health center workforce.

Increased and sustained federal funding will help broaden the pipeline for the future workforce and foster creative strategies at the community level to advance recruitment, training, and retention. It will also allow health centers to offer their workers competitive salaries, to promote their wellbeing through investment in wellness programs & professional development and boost educational programs that provide scholarships and loan forgiveness to trainees who serve in high-need areas. Expanding the list of billable providers on integrated care teams, especially in behavioral and maternal health care, will also help to augment the health center workforce.

While the rest of the world wants to believe we are all on the mend, our health care infrastructure is nowhere close to pandemic recovery, let alone ready for future health crises. With the help of our policymakers such as [INSERT NAMES MEMBERS OF CONGRESS], we can ensure that health centers are strengthened, and the Americans who depend on them have access to the quality health care they deserve.