

Thanks so much to Representatives Jayapal and Dingell for convening this important panel at this crucial time and for kicking off this discussion with such inspiring words that highlight how far we have come but how far we still need to go.

My name is Eagan Kemp and I am the health care policy advocate for Public Citizen, a nonprofit consumer advocacy organization that champions the public interest in the halls of power.

We are experiencing profound and devastating crises that are rending the cracks of our broken health care system: COVID-19 and the legacy of systemic racism. I will keep my remarks brief, but I want to point out one key factor underlying challenges and opportunities being discussed by all of the fantastic speakers today: corporate power and profit.

Profit determines who gets care and who has to go without. I will touch very briefly on problems with our insurance system, hospital policy, and drugs & vaccine policy.

Insurers

When I talk about the health care system being broken, I am taking on the perspective of patients, their families, and working people across this country. Can you imagine a more absurd system than one where tens of millions of Americans lose the jobs upon which their health insurance depends in the middle of a historic pandemic?

Over 150 million Americans get their coverage through their jobs right now, meaning any of them could be at risk of losing coverage as we deal with waves of COVID-19. We have heard horror stories from journalists and our own members of people falling through the cracks right now.

But from the perspective of insurers, the system works perfectly. They take money from you, your family members, your employer, and the government and then use every sneaky trick in the book to stop you from getting the care you need.

The biggest insurance lobby in the country, AHIP, is in the middle of a PR blitz trying to make the case that their plans are going above and beyond to ensure their enrollees can get COVID-19 testing and treatment.

But when we looked into these supposed benefits for the top 25 insurers, do you what we found? Empty or confusing promises of care and even plans that were failing to meet the standards set by Congress for COVID-19 testing. The gaps were big enough to drive a semi truck through.

Under Medicare for All, you wouldn't have to worry about such confusion because you would be covered at the hospital or provider of your choice for any medically necessary testing, treatment, or prevention.

Hospitals

Similarly, COVID-19 has underscored the failures of our approach to hospitals around this country. Hospitals are increasingly run at the behest of Wall Street vultures who buy crucial hospitals and strip them and sell them for parts, regardless of how many people it hurts.

This situation is far too common, especially for rural hospitals and hospitals that treat a disproportionate amount of people without insurance or who are experiencing poverty or homelessness. These crucial hospitals are at risk of closure in large part because our health care system doesn't reward health or the provision of care.

Under Medicare for All, hospitals would be put on a firm footing through comprehensive and consistent funding that would ensure that hospitals have the money they need to keep their doors open and treat the health needs of their community. Representatives Jayapal and Dingell had the foresight to include specific provisions in their Medicare for All that allow the federal government to be nimble in times of crisis, such as COVID-19 or other emergencies, including the disaster that is black maternal mortality in this country.

As with insurers, Medicare for All would mean a piece of mind that most Americans can barely fathom when it comes to health care.

Drugs

When it comes to drug prices, we all know the American health care system is failing. At this moment, the federal government is pouring billions of dollars into COVID-19 R&D. For all of that investment, it is incumbent upon the government to ensure these publicly-supported COVID-19 treatments and vaccine technologies are treated as global public goods.

The federal government must promote increased manufacturing capacity throughout the world to meet the unprecedented demand and to promote innovation through open science and collaboration.

It is long past time that the federal government ensured a fair, public return on public investment in pharmaceutical research to ensure products are priced at a level that is fair, reasonable and facilitates access. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare how U.S. taxpayers subsidize research and development, yet little has been done to protect Americans against drug corporations abusing government-granted monopolies through price gouging.

Medicare for All would bring the full negotiating power of the federal government on behalf of the American People to ensure they can access the drugs and other treatments they need.

Thank you again for having me on the panel today and happy to take any questions folks have after the other speakers wrap up.