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Pennsylvania COVID-19 Response Task Force on Health Disparity Announces One-Month Milestones

Harrisburg, PA – The Pennsylvania COVID-19 Response Task Force on Health Disparity chaired by Lt. Gov. John Fetterman has in its first month progressed toward addressing a preexisting health-related inequity that's been exacerbated by the novel coronavirus.

Governor Tom Wolf formed the task force last month and assigned it with identifying obstacles that cause disparity among marginalized populations and bringing those issues to his attention. He was called to action by the disproportionate number of coronavirus cases among Pennsylvania's marginalized communities, which have been hit hardest by the virus.

"Health disparity has been an issue for generations, with Pennsylvania's marginalized citizens being among those with the least access to quality healthcare," Fetterman said. "This task force's immediate purpose is to identify issues related to the coronavirus and let the governor know what could be done to help right now, but our longer-term goal is to give the governor recommendations to tackle the health-related disadvantages that have plagued our marginalized communities for too long."

Since holding its first meeting on April 17, the task force has been instrumental in:

- Reinforcement of Secretary of Health Rachel Levine's mandate for healthcare providers to include race and ethnicity data for patients tested for coronavirus. After Governor Wolf's enforcement reminder, compliance has risen from approximately 30-to-35 percent to 70-to-75 percent of new tests.
- Including sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) in contact-tracing data. After advocates in the community voiced concerns and pushed for inclusion, the governor announced the Department of Health will be working with Sara Alert, a new data-collection platform, for a system modification to collect sexual orientation and gender identity data.
- Highlighting the need for more accessible testing, including more locations, access for the uninsured, and non-discriminatory providers.
- Increasing support for community providers, highlighting the important work they are doing to mitigate the spread of coronavirus in their communities. The task force has worked to connect community providers and other community groups with state resources to improve their outreach.

- Advocating for housing security, which is of particular concern for those who are temporarily unable to work because of the coronavirus. Earlier this month, Governor Wolf signed an executive order protecting Pennsylvanians from evictions or foreclosure through July 10.
- Creating more translated PSAs, so speakers of various languages have access to COVID-19 information and resources.

“We’re proud of the work we’ve done so far, and we’re thankful that Governor Wolf recognized the need for an entity like this task force,” said member Julie Strickland-Gilliard, a Pittsburgh native and the Western Regional Director for Fetterman’s office. “While we’re connecting resources so solutions can be developed to help underserved communities during this pandemic, we’ve also got an eye on policies that can be carried into the future to correct this disparity for good.”

The task force is comprised of members identifying as minorities affected by health disparity and includes the Department of Health’s Office of Health Equity and five commissions. They are Latino Affairs, Asian Pacific American Affairs, Women’s Commission, African American Affairs, and LGBTQ Affairs. The group is collaborating with community members, stakeholders, and legislators to send recommendations to Governor Tom Wolf for addressing issues related to a higher incidence of COVID-19 among minorities.

Recommendations will represent both short-term and long-term goals related to the disparity reported during the COVID-19 pandemic in our vulnerable communities.