

Healthcare Reform in America: A Reference Handbook, Second Edition –  
Perspectives  
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## A Call to Action

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Can you hear the “call” - - - a call for you to become engaged in your community? If you are reading this essay it is reasonable to assume that you have had many advantages - - - affirmative actions by family, friends, and teachers - - - that enabled you to become all that you have become. In your lifetime, to date, 4.5 million babies were born each year of which 25% were born into extreme poverty, often without hope, dreams or affirmative actions. Yes, more than 1 million babies each year are born into poverty! These babies will have limited access to early childhood development, pre-school programs, K-12 education, access to health care, and lives replete with chronic diseases and disorders, resulting in reduced life expectancy. Can their fate be changed?

Each of us have many leadership moments in a lifetime - - - calls to action - - - to mobilize people to focus on solving problems of significance to the larger society! I am reaching out to you to address the enormous challenge of health disparities and economic inequities throughout America.

Health disparities presents challenges - - teenage sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancy, inadequate prenatal care, birth defects (structural and behavioral), child and spousal abuse, childhood obesity, type 1 and 2 diabetes, and an array of chronic diseases and disorders such as cancers, heart, lung, kidney, muscle, bone, and dental diseases and disorders (tooth decay, periodontal disease and associated tooth loss), and the plight of the frail elderly with associated neurovascular diseases. Of course, there are many examples of learning disabilities, behavioral aberrations, and, eventually, limited life expectancy. Today, our nation struggles to address the prenatal care issues for all pregnancies, childhood and adult obesity, “the silent epidemic” of tooth decay in poor children of color, autism, cardiovascular diseases, and dementias. Upstream of these health disparities, representing 80% of the disease burden as presented by 25% of the US population (today approaching 312 million people), is poverty as a result of economic inequalities. In America, research clearly provides evidence that social and education mobility is easier for some of us than others. It is the cluster of socioeconomic determinants that result in poverty, health disparities, and economic inequalities. Further, we must provide advocacy for the millions of people who are our nation’s poor and working poor!

The #1 chronic disease of children is tooth decay and this disease is preventable! Imagine an American dies every hour from oral cancer and this chronic disease is also preventable! In fact, most of the major chronic diseases and disorders are preventable through individual choices - - choices of diet, exercise, and the avoidance of tobacco products, alcohol, and recreational drug use.

The consequences of economic inequality are profound. Of all industrial nations of the world, US women have the shortest life expectancy with poor and working poor women of color with the poorest life expectancy statistics.

Imagine the possibilities - - - gain economic gains that increase our nation's middle class and that improvement in the human condition results in education, wealth, wellness and major advances in the quality of life for more people. Can we envision such a nation as a result of our individual enlightened self-interest? Can we envision prenatal care, early childhood development, a superior K-12 education, and multiple post-secondary education options for education and/or training for all people? A higher minimum wage?

Can we achieve a more reasonable distribution of wealth rather than perpetuate the 1% wealthy versus the remaining 99%? Should 20% of the college educated U.S. continue to possess 50% of our nation's wealth? Can we close or reduce the gap in wealth between the penthouse and the poorhouse? Should a CEO of a major national industry be compensated 422 times the median compensation for a worker in that industry? Can these and related advances in our civilization also result in a profound decline in violence and killings? Despite the remarkable advances in science and technology, we continue to defer social investments that improve the human condition, leave millions of people behind, and devastate the lives and dreams of our children and of our civilization. Income inequality has surged in the United States since the 1970s and has become much more unequal than Europe. Ironically, despite our nation's alleged science and technology prowess, we spend more money on health care, K-12 education, and federal and

state welfare programs that any other industrial nation in the world, yet our results rank us amongst the mediocre nations of the world. In terms of wellness, we rank 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> in morbidity and mortality, education attainment in K-12 education, childbirth deaths, tooth loss, and life expectancy. These data sets are particularly valid descriptors for children, adults and elderly people of color - - -the historically underserved people of America. Can we craft “smart” policies that result in success that really improves the United State quality of life for all people?

Following World War II, a number of public policies resulted in a rapid expansion of the middle class in the United States - - -the GI Bill and higher education opportunities for many millions of returning veterans, land-grant universities, digital and biological research investments through the NIH (National Institutes of Health), NSF (National Science Foundation), and DOD (Department of Defense), civil rights legislation, DHEW (Department of Health, Education and Welfare) programs to address K-12 education, health education and practices, and numerous welfare programs. This so-called “Golden Era” lasted from 1950 to 1980, triggering an increase in middle class America and a “pause” in the concentration of wealth in the hands of 1% of the nation. Since the 1980s, the middle class has become endangered, smaller, the size of the homeless has grown, and the nation’s wealth increasingly held within 1% of our U.S. population.

How will you respond to this call? Our society as a whole is rapidly moving toward knowledge-based economies, with wealth increasingly reflecting level of education and know-how, science and math skills, social skills, appreciation of cultural diversity, and networking. What piece of “wellness” and “economic

inequities” will you pursue? We need your energy, intellect, and willingness to stay focused for the long haul. I argue that it is in your enlightened self-interest to contribute to the health, education, and welfare success of those around you in your communities (and beyond). Can we profoundly reduce violence, racism, and poverty while increasing wellness and literacy for all Americans?