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Letter to the Editor
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The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is having a deadly impact on every community across our state. At the latest count, more than 1,100 Louisianans have lost their lives due to complications from the virus – with many more deaths expected in the weeks ahead.

As reported by the Louisiana Department of Health, African Americans make up nearly 60% of all reported deaths from COVID-19, even though they represent only 32% of our state's population. This overwhelming disparity should sound off alarm bells and get the attention of every Louisianan. Public health officials agree that African Americans are not biologically more susceptible to the virus. Instead, they believe a number of factors, such as underlying medical conditions and social determinants of health, are to blame.

This does not come as a shock to those of us in the world of healthcare. Every crisis, whether it be Hurricane Katrina, the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, or the 2016 floods has peeled back the curtain and unveiled the growing racial disparities in healthcare that still exist in Louisiana.

Fortunately, Louisiana's Community Health Centers have long served the healthcare needs of Louisiana's most vulnerable communities. In 2018 alone, Louisiana's 39 Community Health Center organizations provided healthcare services to over 444,000 individuals. Now with the threat of COVID-19, they have risen to the challenge and continue to go above and beyond in meeting the needs of their patients. All health centers are supporting the work of Louisiana's overrun hospitals by addressing the rising demand for care, assessing patient symptoms, and helping in conducting triage. Health centers, already known for their efficiency and innovation, have quickly redesigned clinical protocols, rearranged their facilities, and implemented telehealth services to care for their patients while keeping them safe from exposure. They are hard at work in our minority communities, fighting misinformation and ensuring access to COVID-19 testing.

Health centers have been working to address health disparities for decades by emphasizing the importance of preventive care, helping patients manage chronic conditions, promoting the importance of healthy eating and exercise, and working to address social determinants of health. Despite progress made, health centers cannot reach their full potential without greater support from Congress and long-term, sustainable funding.

When the current COVID-19 emergency passes, will we learn from our mistakes? Will we actually take meaningful steps to improve the health and well-being of Louisiana's African American population and other racial minorities?

Community Health Centers are a part of this equation. With the appropriate funding and resources required, Community Health Centers are ready and willing to lead this change.