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Rather Than Re-Invent the Wheel, Let's Support Louisiana's Federally Qualified Health Centers

Over the past nine months, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has put a spotlight on the enormous health inequities that exist across our country – especially here in Louisiana.

Fortunately, Federally Qualified Health Centers (commonly referred to as Community Health Centers) continue to expand access to primary care, oral, and behavioral health care to our state's most vulnerable and underserved communities. These facilities essentially serve as our state's safety-net, ensuring that patients who depend on Medicaid and even those with no health insurance have access to affordable, quality healthcare services. Louisiana's 39 Community Health Center organizations collectively operate nearly 300 individual healthcare delivery sites, expanding access to healthcare for our state's underserved and vulnerable communities. In 2019 alone, these facilities offered primary care, dental, and behavioral health services to over 465,000 Louisianans – most of whom depend on Medicaid or find themselves without health insurance.

Earlier this month, we learned that Ochsner Health intends to re-invent the wheel and spearhead a new \$100 million initiative to build 15 "health centers" in underserved communities over the next five years.

While Ochsner Health and other corporate, profit-driven entities describe themselves as pioneers in this space, the reality is that Community Health Centers have been on the ground serving the people of Louisiana for decades. While we are heartened to see their new commitment to primary and preventive care for these populations, we wish Ochsner Health would have focused more on partnership, engaging in collaboration, and strengthening the ongoing work of our members.

Ochsner Health plans to construct "health centers" in areas in which there are a large number of Community Health Centers already operating and serving patients. In the Greater New Orleans region alone, there are 72 Community Health Centers operated by 15 different organizations.

If you want to address health inequities and improve the health of our citizens all while providing affordable and accessible care, look no further than our Community Health Center network. Our health center members are battle-tested and proven leaders in meeting the needs of these communities. Since Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (and over the past few years with the advent of Medicaid expansion), Louisiana's Community Health Center network has grown exponentially. Health centers are now located in 55 of Louisiana's 64 parishes.

Our members are leading the way:

- educating communities on the importance of regular health screenings and preventive care,
- helping patients manage chronic conditions like diabetes, hypertension, and kidney disease,
- emphasizing and encouraging positive lifestyle choices through tobacco cessation and healthy eating initiatives,
- addressing the opioid epidemic and guiding patients through recovery,
- conducting COVID-19 testing and keeping patients safe by expanding the use of telehealth technology and remote patient monitoring systems.

These facilities save taxpayer money by keeping patients out of the emergency room and focusing on the need for primary and preventive care. In fact, in 2019 Louisiana's Community Health Centers saved our healthcare system nearly \$900 million – with \$645 million in savings for our Medicaid program.

Health Centers are also woven deeply into the communities they serve. Through the leadership and direction of patient-majority boards of directors, these facilities are especially sensitive and tuned into challenges facing their patients. Rather than profits driving their decisions, health centers direct their resources and attention to addressing the most important needs of their communities.

Finally, Community Health Centers are held to the most rigorous standards of care, patient safety, transparency, and financial responsibility. Unlike private healthcare providers, all health centers are required to submit annual reporting to the federal government where it is made available and easily accessible to the general public.

We are encouraged and deeply grateful that organizations such as Xavier University, the Brees Dream Foundation, and Ochsner Health are deploying their resources to address health inequities in our state. But rather than duplicate efforts, we encourage these organizations to build upon the foundation already built by Louisiana's Community Health Centers. Specifically, we should work together on ways in which we can tackle those societal factors that have such a profound impact on the health of populations, i.e. the effects of poverty, access to healthy food, homelessness, health literacy, criminal justice reform, etc.

By working together we can create a healthier Louisiana for ALL citizens.

About the Louisiana Primary Care Association

The Louisiana Primary Care Association (LPCA) represents 39 federally funded, private, non-profit and public Community Health Centers (and 3 Look-Alikes) across Louisiana that serve over 465,000 patients annually. LPCA promotes community-based health services through advocacy, education, and collaboration with community partners. Our goal is to ensure that every Louisianan has access to affordable, quality, primary care services. For more information, visit www.LPCA.net.