



PRIMARY CARE *MESSAGING* MATTERS

A Communications Briefing
California Health Care Foundation
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Summary:

For primary care revitalization efforts to succeed, policymakers and stakeholders must 1) **view primary care investment as a path to achieve their goals** for health care accessibility, affordability, quality, and equity and 2) be **activated** to make primary care investment and improvement a policy priority.

Background:

Decades of research have shown that increased investments in primary care lead to higher-quality and more equitable care as well as lower costs. Yet the US, on average, spends only about five cents of every health care dollar on primary care, or about one-third of what other high-income countries spend.

A healthier future for all can be built by reorienting health care back to patients and their relationship with primary care providers and care teams.

In 2021, the California Health Care Foundation (CHCF) convened public and private health care purchasers, policymakers, analysis and improvement specialists, consumer advocacy organizations, and funders to advance primary care investment strategies and activities within the Primary Care Investment Coordinating Group of California (PICG). The PICG supports California-focused research to inform changes in health care policy and industry practices, identifies priorities for measuring, reporting, and assessing the results of primary care spending, and aligns primary care investment activities and efforts across the state.

Learn more about CHCF's Primary Care Matters initiative at <https://www.chcf.org/resource/primary-care-matters/>.

Message Development:

To support the work of the PICG, CHCF retained communications strategists with Paschal Roth Public Affairs to develop messaging recommendations for several key audiences - primary care experts, policymakers, purchasers, payers, specialists and hospitals, and consumer-facing organizations.

Paschal Roth reviewed primary care research, a wide range of organizational messaging, and conducted 11 key informant interviews with providers, plans, consumer advocates and policy experts whose insights shaped the message recommendations. These recommendations have been deployed by CHCF and members of the PICG. They have not been quantitatively tested.

Key Takeaways and How They Apply with Key Stakeholders:

- Primary care is a means, not an end goal, for many potential supporters.
- Opportunity-based, aspirational messages aid coalition building.
- Link the need for more primary care investment with incentivizing quality, patient-centered care.
- Shifting resources within the healthcare system or changing financial incentives are divisive concepts for some health care stakeholders.
- Health care system cost-effectiveness is important but it is not a value shared by all stakeholders.

Primary care experts are well aware of the value of primary care and the benefit of primary care investment. Coaching experts to center their communication in the patient experience and relationship is an important communications goal for this audience.

Policymakers and advocates for consumers, equity, and safety net services don't yet see primary care investment as their end goal. Instead, they need to see how primary care investment delivers on their own priorities - more accessible, affordable, responsive, quality care that delivers on health equity.

Consumers understand the value of relationships in health care and appreciate having a guide to help them navigate a complex system and take prevention measures. Unfortunately, they may have had negative experiences with primary care providers being positioned as "gatekeepers" to specialty services. Likewise, messaging about reducing system costs could be interpreted negatively by consumers as compromising the quality of care they receive in order to save the system money. Messaging to consumers should emphasize the relationships underlying primary care: a provider close to your community who can advocate for your health and well-being in the system.

Specialists and hospitals should be met with messaging emphasizing primary care investment **outcomes** over payment models. Key informants believed specialists can be best engaged by appealing to the reasons why they went to medical school and the desire to use their high-level training for the patients who need them most.

Essential Do's and Don'ts

Do	Don't
Center messages in patient experience - primary care means <i>relationships</i> : a provider/team to help you navigate a complex health care system, a provider/team close to you/from your community.	Focus on the benefits to health care “system” at large (e.g. cost reduction)
Emphasize the role of primary care providers as navigators or guides in the health care system for better patient health throughout their lives	Play into concerns that primary care providers serve as “gatekeepers” or additional stops in the path to needed specialty care
Appeal to the reasons specialists chose their field - they want to interact with patients who need their expertise	Play up shifting resources from specialists/hospitals into primary care

TOPLINE MESSAGES

- Having a health insurance card in your wallet is critical but it does not mean having access to affordable, high-quality health care. This is particularly true for people with low incomes and communities of color.
- Health care means having access to a doctor and a team of care providers in your community who know you, help you avoid getting sick, advocate for your health in our health care system, and coordinate your testing and care from specialists.
- Everyone deserves high-quality care like this but our health care system isn't set up to provide it, so family doctors and community providers are becoming harder to find

in many communities. This undermines the goal that should be driving our health care system - keeping us healthy rather than waiting to treat us when we are sick.

- We can build a healthier future for all by reorienting health care back to patients and investing in how patients engage the health care system - their relationship with a primary doctor or community health care provider.
- Patients want more affordable, quality, responsive, and equitable health care. Investing in primary care now will help us achieve these goals.
- Recognizing that change demands partnership, leading health care experts, industry leaders, and consumer advocates are working together to prioritize investing in and supporting a health care system guided by stronger relationships between patients, their primary doctor, and care providers in their community.

KEY MESSAGING FOR PRIMARY CARE EXPERTS, POLICYMAKERS, PURCHASERS, & PAYERS

- Health care has grown to nearly 18 percent of our nation's economy and it's not stopping. Health care spending growth outpaces our economy and inflation, becoming less affordable to families, employers, and public employers.¹
- Despite our health care system's size, care is fragmented and favors treatment over prevention. We have an epidemic of poorly managed chronic diseases. Structural racism, discrimination and other obstacles lead to significant health disparities for communities of color, LGBTQ+ community members and others who have been disenfranchised.²
- We want everyone to be healthy, to have equal access to the care they need when they need it, and to have a positive experience of care. For all we spend on health care, our health care system must do a better job of keeping us healthy. By investing in and strengthening primary care, we can resolve many failings of our health care system.

¹ [2021 Edition: Health Care Costs](#). CHCF.

² [CORE Health Equity Science and Intervention Strategy](#). CDC

- A significant reason our health care system underdelivers is because it undervalues primary care. Nationally, more than half of medical office visits are with primary care providers but primary care doctors make up just 30% of the physician workforce and earn 30% less than their peers. Even worse, primary care receives just 5 cents of every health care dollar spent.³
- This lack of investment in primary care undermines patient health and their experience with our health care system. As patients' initial contact with the health care system, primary care providers are best positioned to identify and efficiently address patients' physical and behavioral health needs then coordinate a comprehensive care plan, including tests and specialist care.
- Primary care prevents serious health problems, personal tragedies, and higher care costs. Compared to patients who only see specialists, people with a primary care provider save 33 percent on health care and are 19 percent less likely to die prematurely.⁴
- A cliff is coming. The primary care workforce is shrinking, which will push our health care system even further away from our health care goals of quality, equity, and affordability. Nearly 96 million Americans live in areas with a shortage of primary care providers, a shortage of just under 17,000 primary care providers.⁵ Primary care providers are aging out (54 is the average age), fewer are entering the field because of financial pressures, and many are leaving the field because of burnout.
- By focusing more existing health care resources on primary care, we can get better results out of our health care system for all. We want more quality, responsive, equitable, and affordable health care. Investing in primary care now is how we get there. Decades of research show this investment is essential to achieving these health care goals.
- Recognizing the urgent need to strengthen primary care, more than one-third of states and several of the nation's largest public and private purchasers have prioritized shifting more health care dollars to primary care.⁶

³ [Revitalizing the U.S. Primary Care Infrastructure](#). New England Journal of Medicine. 2021.

⁴ [The Case for Primary Care](#). Primary Care Progress.

⁵ [Health Resources and Services Administration](#). Accessed 7/25/22

⁶ [Investing in Primary Care: Lessons from State-based Efforts](#). CHCF.

- Let's expect more and get more from our health care system by strengthening patient relationships with primary care providers.

KEY MESSAGING FOR SPECIALISTS AND HOSPITALS

- Being a doctor is a special calling to help people live healthier, better lives. Doctors take an ancient oath, pledging to treat patients to the best of their ability and to conduct themselves ethically. Our health care system should support doctors in living up to these values.
- With limited health care resources, our system should be designed so generalists and specialists interact with the patients who need them, when they need them. By improving how the system connects with patients, doctors can spend more time helping the patients who need them most. By revitalizing primary care, we can make better use of health care resources while improving patient experience and health.
- The rapid shift to telehealth and virtual health during COVID-19 shows our capacity to adapt to meet patient and provider needs while preserving the health care system's financial sustainability.
- The emergence of COVID-19 variants will prolong the pandemic, revealing this crisis as a health care system reform opportunity that should not be wasted.
- By strengthening how patients engage the health care system, we can save it from COVID-related challenges. Few Americans have been vaccinated where they usually receive care - their regular doctor's office. A lack of trusted primary care relationships could hinder our efforts to overcome COVID-19.⁷ Stronger patient relationships with primary care providers can rebuild trust and help inoculate the health care system from the pandemic's costly and destructive impacts moving forward.
- Recognizing that change demands partnership, leading health care experts, industry leaders, and consumer advocates are working together to make us all healthier by investing in and supporting a health care system guided by stronger doctor/patient

⁷ [Missing the Point: How Primary Care Can Overcome Vaccine Hesitancy](#). The New England Journal of Medicine. 2021.

relationships between patients, their primary doctor, and community care providers. A new wave of health care reforms is dawning and we invite you to be part of it.

KEY MESSAGING FOR CONSUMERS

- Everyone needs access to a doctor or community care provider who knows them, their family, and their community. Access to primary care relationships like this is essential to keep us healthy, advocate for us in the health care system, and coordinate our testing and care from specialists and other community health providers. This is how we get the best information we need to make decisions about our health. It's a lifelong need we all share.
- As patients, we need a guide and an advocate for our needs in the health care system. Without that relationship, we can easily get lost in the system, get ignored by it, or not trust it.
- Primary care is essential to keeping our care affordable while keeping us healthy by preventing disease, managing chronic illness, and navigating social realities impacting our health.
- Compared to patients who only see specialists, people with a primary care provider save 33 percent on health care costs each year and are 19 percent less likely to die prematurely.⁸
- With four in ten American adults saying they've delayed or gone without health care because of costs, improved primary care access can help ensure health care is available to everyone.⁹
- Our ability to develop a relationship with a primary care provider who knows us and our needs is threatened. Same goes for our ability to improve our experience of the health care system as patients. Nearly 96 million Americans live in areas with a shortage of primary care providers, a shortage of just under 17,000 primary care

⁸ [The Case for Primary Care](#). Primary Care Progress.

⁹ [Americans' Challenges with Health Care Costs](#), Kaiser Family Foundation

providers.¹⁰ Most are aging out (54 is the average age) and fewer are entering the field because of financial pressures.

- It doesn't have to stay this way. It's time to reorient our health care system back to us – the patients. We want more affordable, quality, responsive, and equitable health care. Supporting policies that strengthen primary care will help us achieve these goals.
- Let's build a better health care system by building up primary care infrastructure, imposing accountability onto the health care system based on patient health, and rewarding primary care providers who keep us healthy.

¹⁰ [Health Resources and Services Administration](#). Accessed 7/25/22