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President-elect Joe Biden receives his second dose of a COVID-19 vaccine at ChristianaCare Christiana Hospital in Newark, Del., Jan. 11, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Tom Brenner)

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The Catholic Health Association issued an extensive list of priorities it would like President-elect Joe Biden's administration to pursue.

Those priorities include strengthening the Affordable Care Act, increasing access to affordable health care, making senior citizens a priority, removing barriers to health care access by immigrants, and increased focus on the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

"It will take a highly coordinated federal response to bring the virus under control and stabilize our nation's health care delivery system," said Mercy Sr. Mary Haddad, CHA president, in a Jan. 7 letter to Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris and the Biden transition team. The text of the five-page, 2,100-word letter was released Jan. 8 by the CHA.

Sister Haddad said she wants to see, among other things, improved supply and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines as well as that of personal protective equipment and COVID-19 testing kits.

"Our long-term care facilities and other programs," she said, "did not receive protective equipment or testing when they needed it. Then, when help did arrive, the initial equipment was often of poor quality and not usable."

Moreover, she said, "we recommend that this administration place a priority on the needs of seniors and those who provide services for them. As efforts are made to address what led to the devastating impact the virus had in long-term care, we urge that the mental health and quality of life as well as the infection control needs be considered."

To bulk up the Affordable Care Act and increase insurance coverage, Haddad suggested that the incoming administration "open a special enrollment period in the federal health insurance marketplaces to provide health coverage options for those who have lost insurance during this pandemic," and to "invest in public marketing

and outreach activities to increase enrollment in ACA plans."

Haddad said the Biden administration should "work with Congress to make coverage truly affordable for individuals and families by providing a marketplace reinsurance program; addressing the 'family glitch' that disqualifies families from the marketplace premium tax credits when employer coverage is available but unaffordable for families; increasing premium subsidies and capping premiums for those with incomes below 400% of the federal poverty level."



Dr. Dan Ponticiello and Dr. Gabriel Gomez intubate a COVID-19 patient at Providence Mission Hospital in Mission Viejo, Calif., Jan. 8, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Lucy Nicholson)

She added the administration could also combat racism by addressing health equity issues. Two ways to do that, Sister Haddad said, would be to "address the disparate effect of COVID-19 on people of color and their communities by directing additional funding and support to states, localities and community-based organizations for targeted outreach, testing and treatment for vulnerable individuals and communities," and to "increase language assistance resources and outreach for

limited-English-proficient populations."

She said Medicaid can be strengthened by rescinding the proposed Medicaid Fiscal Accountability Rule and recent rules that weaken the maintenance of effort protections for Medicaid enrollees; "eliminating Medicaid work requirements and other barriers to eligibility in state waivers"; and "working with states and Congress to expand Medicaid coverage to ensure the most vulnerable have access to needed timely care, including 12-month post-partum care for pregnant women."

To improve health care outcomes for immigrants and refugees, Haddad recommended that the Biden administration "protect and continue" the Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals program and rescind "the harmful 'public charge' rule promulgated by the previous administration. The addition of Medicaid and other federal assistance programs to the definition of public charge for legal immigrants has been detrimental to their health and well-being and an additional burden on our health care system."

Noting the disparity between rich and poor exacerbated by the pandemic, she said the administration should "provide flexibility in federal health programs to address health-related social needs" and "strengthen federal programs and policies that address the social needs of low-income individuals such as Supplemental Security Income, the Earned Income Tax Credit, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the National School Lunch Program and housing benefits such as rental assistance," among others.

Haddad also asked that the incoming administration honor "reasonable conscience protections to allow Catholic health facilities to continue to provide health care in accord with our religious and moral convictions."

"We urge your administration to work with us as you develop your legislative and regulatory agendas," she wrote Biden, "to ensure that Catholic hospitals and health care facilities can continue to provide vital health care services to their communities and those most in need."

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