COVID-19 TESTING IS CRITICAL IN COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

The following is a statement from the Georgia State Medical Association regarding COVID-19 testing: With the rising number of cases in the United States and especially in hotspots such as New York City, Chicago, and New Orleans, the imperative for healthcare access to testing and healthcare equity for all Americans is critical in the present pandemic of COVID-19. The rate of infection and mortality of African Americans with the coronavirus in these cities is significantly out of proportion to their representation in the general population of each these cities.

We are keenly aware of the comorbidities disproportionately affecting African Americans and Latinos. Even though we still find that our patients have diabetes mellitus, systemic hypertension, renal disease, breast and prostate cancers, at a greater rate compared to the general population, we are concerned that healthcare disparities are related to limited testing, not proactively performing enough testing, and not doing enough early testing in the African American population.

In Georgia, particularly in Albany and Macon, extensive, equitable access to free and quick testing, with social distancing, and tracing of contacts, and the wearing of masks must be done on a regular basis to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

In view of the disproportionate number and percentages of African American citizens being affected by COVID-19, we have several recommendations for dealing with our present challenges in our community. One, test our population with an immediate reduction of any hurdles and barriers, so that an easy prompt access to identifying the African American citizens can be done. Some of our members are reporting that the criteria for obtaining a test for the coronavirus even after being exposed to an individual who has tested positive for the coronavirus is not a substantial enough indication at some testing sites, to warrant and to justify prompt testing of African Americans in a number of areas in Georgia. This roadblock should immediately be stopped, not only for the health of the individual needing the test, but in order to reduce the spread of the coronavirus.

Second, tracing the contacts, including racial, ethnic, gender, and age statistics of the individual testing positive, is significant in order to decrease the spread of the coronavirus and contracting COVID-19. This tracing of contacts who have been exposed to someone with the coronavirus can possibly help not only to reduce the morbidity, but it can also possibly decrease the mortality in the African American and Latino populations in the State.

Third, social distancing of 6-feet has been recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Continued practices of hand washing with soap and water and hand sanitizing with a solution containing at least 60% alcohol will be helpful in mitigating the spread of the coronavirus. In addition, when one coughs, doing so into one’s elbow, and avoid touching one’s face, nose, and eyes during this crisis. Moreover, continue to wear your mask in public spaces.

COVID-19 has again shined a bright light on what is already a well-known fact, the disparities in health care that exist for African Americans. The usual solutions that are aimed at the whole will be ineffectual for this highly vulnerable population. What is needed is a more in-depth assessment of the social determinants of health care and application of the enhanced financial resources necessary and the recommended public health efforts described in order to resolve these discrepancies. Now is an opportune time, mandated by the current
pandemic, to help resolve health disparities that have haunted the United States for centuries. We can achieve health equity, maybe the current crisis is the impetus needed to achieve this heretofore unobtainable goal. Georgia State Medical Association stands primed and ready to lead the way.

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Georgia State Medical Association (GSMA) is the collective voice of African American physicians and the leading force for parity and justice. GSMA is one of the oldest organizations of African American professionals in America representing African American physicians and the patients we serve in Georgia.

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