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A Resilient Illinois: Why the lessons we are learning from COVID-19 are more important than ever

Three years ago today, January 24, 2020, Illinois confirmed its first case of COVID-19. Since then, Illinois has recorded 4 million cases and 36,000 deaths – losses that have devastated families and communities across every part of our state.

The numbers have left us numb. We have started to shut COVID-19 out of our lives. But the threat remains. COVID-19 took the lives of more than 200 Illinoisians in December, more deaths than from Ebola in the entire world last year. Many of those deaths were preventable.

It is time to remind ourselves that in 2023, we have effective tools we didn't have in 2020. And we have something even more powerful: **Knowledge and Experience**. We know now what can protect us: a vaccine, a timely test, a pill, a mask, a portable air filter, an open window or just staying home if sick.

We are thankful to be in a better place. The deaths and strain on our healthcare system are nothing like the depths of the pandemic when Illinois recorded hundreds of deaths and thousands of hospital admissions each week. But, as new COVID-19 variants emerge and other respiratory illnesses circulate, we must remain vigilant to preserve hospital capacity and protect our most vulnerable.

As we move forward, we must understand where we are and how to maintain a health system that protects us from challenges ahead – those we can anticipate and those we cannot.

What We Have Learned:

- **Illinois is a State Full of Heroes**

Illinois had no shortage of heroes. We start with the bravery of our state's frontline healthcare and public health workers who risked their lives to protect us. And the pandemic scientists who raced to understand the new virus and the steps needed to protect us, and created the lifesaving tests, vaccines, and treatments that helped limit the effects of this deadly disease.

The most unsung heroes were the essential workers who did not have the luxury of working from home. They kept our grocery stores open, cooked our food, drove our buses, made deliveries, and taught our children. Those in [community and social services occupations had the highest death rate from COVID-19](#)

followed by transportation workers. Society owes a debt to these heroes, many of whom suffered disease and death, we may never be able to repay.

- **Health Inequities Must be Addressed**

The pandemic shined a harsh spotlight on the disparities and fragmentation that has existed in our healthcare system for too long. The racial, socioeconomic, and geographic disparities we saw early in the pandemic revealed a health system that was not equitable for all.

Our scientific discoveries did not guarantee access or equitable distribution. It took leadership from Governor JB Pritzker and sustained efforts by local, city, county, and state leaders to roll out vaccines and treatment equitably. By May 2021, more than [10 million doses of vaccines were administered free to Illinoisans](#) through a massive vaccination campaign involving local health departments and community groups in every corner of the state.

- **Misinformation is Affecting Health**

Misinformation has eroded trust in the people and systems that protect our health. Dangerous misinformation about vaccines and unvetted medical treatments spread through social and even traditional media channels.

We learned that countering misinformation and building trust requires constant effort. Illinois took an important step in this direction when we became the first state in the nation to require [high schools to teach media literacy](#).

The Way Forward

We already have examples of how lessons learned from the pandemic have strengthened our public health system.

We've used those lessons to launch successful responses to Mpox (formerly monkeypox) and Ebola. Within weeks, the public health system mobilized to distribute vaccines and share accurate information about Mpox. In doing so, we leveraged relationships and communications channels developed for the pandemic. For Ebola, federal, state and local public health authorities established protocols to closely monitor travelers from Uganda, again building off platforms developed for COVID-19.

Looking forward, our mission to rebuild the future of public health is just beginning. We need a health system mobilized around decreasing health inequities not just with respiratory diseases, but also chronic diseases and mental and behavioral disorders. We must continue to prioritize a public health system that works best behind the scenes, investing in people, information, and infrastructure with the goal of protecting and promoting your health. And we need to constantly earn your trust – by countering misinformation with accurate data and sharing the incredible work of health heroes across Illinois.

The future in Illinois looks bright. Let's meet this moment together and use these lessons and those we continue to learn to make every community in Illinois as healthy as it can be.

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