



**Testimony for the Committee on Health
Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services Performance Oversight Performance Oversight
Hearing
March 4th, 2021**

To: Committee on Health Chairman Vincent Gray, Committee on Health members, and Committee Staff

From: Kerry Savage, Director of Policy at PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)

Date: March 4th, 2021

Good morning, Councilmember Gray and members of the Committee on Health. My name is Kerry Savage, and I serve as the Director of Policy at PAVE. I have the honor and privilege of working alongside PAVE parent leaders, a truly awe-inspiring and diverse group of Washingtonians who have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic to advocate for their vision for a family-centered education-system and response to Coronavirus in DC. In this vision, parents lifted up the importance of consistent access to health care, and in particular, removing barriers to access the DC Healthcare Alliance program.

The Alliance covers important services like doctors visits, prescription drugs, insulin, and dental services for low-income DC residents that aren't eligible for Medicaid, predominantly immigrants and undocumented residents.

Currently, under the Public Health Emergency, Alliance participants *are* allowed to renew once a year instead of every six months, and online as opposed to in person. We want to thank the Council and the Mayor for this change as it has enabled more residents to have continued coverage at this crucial time. To ensure long-term access to care beyond the pandemic, DC should to **permanently extend the renewal period to 12 months with an online option.**

The Pre-Pandemic DC Healthcare Alliance Renewal Process Places an Undue Burden on Families

The pre-pandemic renewal process presented serious barriers to participation, including but not limited to:

- Long lines that form as early as 3:00am, occasionally in inclement weather

- Long wait times at the service center before being seen - as much as the entire day
- The need for multiple trips to a social service center because of extremely limited staff capacity and high demand
- Lack of language assistance
- Finding time to take off work with a job that may not offer paid leave and coordinating child care

These are unnecessary burdens for participants, given that the city has been operating well with an annual online process for the past year. Funding should not be the only thing standing in the way of increasing access to coverage for more DC families. An online option also has the added benefit of ensuring documentation doesn't get lost--this is especially critical to consider for our immigrant community. Even more, the backlog created by more frequent renewals results in delays in processing information and paperwork for all public benefits.

Disruptions in Care Increase Costs for the City

These barriers deter many residents from consistently renewing their health care coverage. The District's Department of Health Care Finance (DHCF) [reports](#) that only half of Alliance participants renew their eligibility when it comes up, resulting in many participants having intermittent and inconsistent care. Lack of preventative care often leads to poor health outcomes that require immediate and/or more intensive medical attention. Thus, those who seek coverage from Alliance after a gap in care, on average, are sicker and require more expensive services, like emergency rooms, which sharply drives up costs for the city.

Further, when someone is sick or chronically ill, they are either less productive or cannot work at all. This past year has taught us how important our health is more than ever before - so let's do all we can to promote a healthy, robust workforce and economy as we look to recover from COVID.

DC Needs to Permanently Extend the Alliance Renewal Period to 12 Months

DC can and should make access to the Alliance program more equitable by **permanently extending the renewal period to 12 months**. This is an opportunity to live out our values as a sanctuary city and make the necessary investments to maintain our position as a leader in ensuring access to health care regardless of income or documentation status.



This work is only possible with bold leadership from the Council and the Health and Human Services agency. I hope you'll champion this as a top priority. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

In service,

Kerry Savage
Director of Policy
PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)