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Dr. Umair A. Shah: Looking back on coronavirus hasn't been easy, but it's time to look ahead

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Dr. Umair A. Shah

By Dr. Umair A. Shah

Nearly a year ago, I wrote a commentary about the importance of holding on and supporting one another as we were in the midst of the winter Omicron surge, pointing out the grit and determination by which Washingtonians took on COVID-19. Fast forward to today – things are better. No doubt. The commentary was titled, “Vaccines, more test kits, and cooperation will get us through.”

While we still want people to be safe and protected, we recognize we have the tools to do so. With an update on the horizon to the limited settings in our state where masks are still required (currently only in health care, long-term care facilities, and correctional settings), it truly will be up to us.

The spirit of “holding on” and “better times are ahead” from a COVID-19 perspective were spot on. Barring some unexpected twists, we can all agree that we are past the worst of this pandemic and the emergency part of this crisis is mostly over. This is a testament to people pulling together. People getting vaccinated and boosted. People getting tested when exposed or with COVID-19 symptoms – including through the state’s Say Yes to

COVID Test program, where millions of tests went out our door and arrived at yours often the very next day. Most everyone cooperated.

I say most everyone because there were those who spread misinformation or deliberately targeted specific communities to confuse or dissuade them from taking the same actions to protect themselves and those around them. In this day of incessant sources of chatter, trust in the very institutions that have been the bedrock of our democracy has eroded.

Our fight against this virus undoubtedly has not been easy and must be seen in the context of our broader society. Indeed, this pandemic has unearthed so much in our lives that we must recover from. We all know that not everyone has agreed on how to fight this pandemic, protect people, or move forward. Yet one thing should give us hope – that the worst of this fight is hopefully in our rearview mirror.

It is time to look ahead. Last year, one of our health colleagues made an insightful comment about health in our state. He said, while we are all focusing on the today, we need someone to look ahead and set the vision for health for the future.

Taking that comment to heart, our agency embarked on a yearlong process of engagement with partners, reviewing ongoing and emerging issues in health, some in-person and others virtually, to develop a strategy for health in our Great State. As a result of this process, recently, our Washington Department of Health released its Transformational Plan: A Vision for Health in Washington State.

This plan has five strategic priorities : health and wellness, health systems and workforce transformation, environmental health, emergency response and resilience, and global and One health (the first state health agency in the nation to include this as one of its pillars). Each priority has a vision statement, a commitment, and six strategies each (for a total of 30 strategies) on how we plan on moving health ahead.

This plan is a testament to the tremendous energy and work required to develop such a “look up and look ahead” plan while we were continuing our twists and turns in fighting COVID-19. So much credit goes to our team for giving attention to both response and planning and our partners who equally helped inform what is now the final plan.

The plan is not a turn-by-turn implementation plan with specificity on how to transform health in our state. It also does not speak to every health issue. Instead, it is a “north

star” for our work to move the needle for transforming health. It has equally helped us inform our budget priorities for this coming year.

In the coming months, we plan to launch a more public way for others to participate in this work. While we know our fight against COVID-19 has taught us much, it is equally essential to turn our attention to other health issues. I have said many times, there are two ways to see this pandemic end. One is to be transactional in nature, simply moving on to the next headline.

The other is to learn from everything we have gone through and be transformational in our approach to our future. Not just to rebuild but to reset – and reset for the better.

We invite you to review the plan to see what we have envisioned and, most importantly, to come together to achieve optimal health for all the people in our communities. Knowing Washington, there is no doubt we can do this.

Dr. Umair A. Shah is the Secretary of Health for Washington state.

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