A new year—with new governors, state legislators and regulators—offers the opportunity “to recalibrate our priorities around health care,” AMA President Susan R. Bailey, MD, said in her opening remarks at the annual AMA State Advocacy Summit, which is being held virtually this year. But, before she continued with that discussion, there was something else she needed to say.

“I want to take a moment to recognize the remarkable heroism of physicians, nurses and everyone on the front lines of this pandemic—the response of our nation’s care providers to this once-in-a-lifetime health emergency has been nothing short of extraordinary,” Dr. Bailey said, noting that many have died, more have become ill and others are experiencing physical and emotional exhaustion.

“Working extremely long hours, under intense conditions, physicians and all those who support them in hospitals and practices—from the janitorial and security staff to the nation’s first responders—have all helped turn the tide in this pandemic,” she said. “We owe them—we owe you—our most heartfelt gratitude.”

To be sure, the COVID-19 pandemic—and particularly the impact it will have on 2021 state budgets—tops the agenda of this year’s summit, but there are several other items of business to address, such as the drug overdose epidemic, which has not only continued during the epidemic, but has gotten worse.

“This pandemic changed our world dramatically almost overnight,” said Dr. Bailey, an allergist and immunologist in Fort Worth, Texas, but she added that advocacy work continued even as face-to-face meetings with policymakers and legislators gave way to Zoom calls.

Dr. Bailey is certainly familiar with this. Her opening address was the third speech to an AMA audience given virtually. This includes the November 2020 AMA Special Meeting and her inauguration last June as the AMA’s 175th president when she told the AMA House of Delegates: “So here I stand, in a
nearly empty studio, talking to you through a video screen. And that’s OK.”

Previous plans put aside

At last year’s summit in Bonita Springs, Florida, then-AMA President Patrice A. Harris, MD, MA, told the hundreds of physicians and state medical society executives and staffers in attendance that health care policy debates needed to include the trusted voices of physicians advocating for their patients—especially on issues such as removing obstacles to patient care and in leading the charge to confront public health crises.

As Dr. Bailey noted, however, plans that were carefully laid out last January to address issues such as unlawful scope-of-practice expansions, surprise billing concerns or the drug overdose epidemic, quickly fell away as the magnitude of the public health emergency became apparent.

Energy and resources were diverted to new issues such as concerns about accessing COVID-19 testing, acquiring personal protection equipment (PPE), and directing financial aid to sustain struggling independent practices.

But those other issues never went away.

“The point is that, even though 2020 was not what we expected, policymaking did not stop,” Dr. Bailey said. “Our concern for patients and our physicians did not stop.”

Looking ahead, she noted the following questions that are on summit attendees’ minds:

- What will health insurance reform look like in a post-COVID world?
- What do we make of state executive orders that were delivered to address urgent needs during the pandemic?
- How can we better integrate telehealth into our practices?
- What have we learned from COVID-19 and how can we apply those lessons to rethinking and rebuilding our state public health infrastructure?
- How can we ensure that we meaningfully address health inequities?
- How can we work with policymakers to help end the drug overdose epidemic that has been made so much worse by the COVID pandemic?

The very first session of the summit covered the hottest topic of the day: “COVID-19 vaccine distribution: Where we are & what you need to know.” It was moderated by Dr. Bailey and panelists included Anita Patel, PharmD, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force.
Also scheduled are panels on public health, telehealth and the drug overdose epidemic, plus there will be “fireside chats” with AMA leaders and state medical association executives.

New advocacy tools for the new normal

During a recent episode of the “AMA COVID-19 Update” examining AMA advocacy priorities in 2020, Todd Askew, AMA senior vice president for advocacy, noted that many state legislatures have not met for 10 months and most states’ individual responses to the pandemic have come in the form of executive orders from their governors.

“There is an immense amount of unfinished business,” Askew said.

He added that state legislative business will most likely be conducted virtually for months to come, and that summit attendees can learn tools and techniques to engage lawmakers in a virtual environment to advocate for their state’s patients and physicians.

Registration is open for the AMA’s annual National Advocacy Conference scheduled for Feb. 23-24.

Clear-eyed optimism required

With the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines, there is a renewed sense of optimism, said AMA Executive Vice President and CEO James L. Madara, MD, and he cautioned physicians to be clear eyed about the difficulties they will be facing in 2021 and that the first quarter of the year will be particularly challenging.

Regarding 2020, Dr. Madara said the role of organized medicine was “to give physicians the lift they needed” to survive a difficult year, be their voice in advocating for PPE, to help practices recover from disruption and “to fight on the side of science and evidence.”