

May 19, 2020

The Honorable Alex Azar
Secretary
Department of Health & Human Services
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

Community-based, primary care is the foundation for ensuring our health care system delivers accessible, high-quality, affordable care. Primary care physicians are essential to ensuring that patients get the right care, in the right setting, at the right time. Unfortunately, one of the most serious consequences of the COVID-19 crisis is the rapid collapse of the community-based primary care system in many parts of the country.

A recent survey of frontline primary care providers found:

- 70% of practices report a greater than 50% decrease in patient volume since the beginning of the pandemic
- 40% of practices have laid off or furloughed staff
- 38% expect to see an increase in non-COVID related deaths due to lack of access or delayed care, and
- 35% believe most independent primary care practices will be eliminated after the first wave of the pandemic

Patients and communities, especially those that are underserved and under siege because of COVID-19, cannot afford wide-spread closures of community-based primary care practices. But that is increasingly a likely consequence as primary care practices lose revenue and are not able or eligible to access much of the federal emergency funding. For example, practices that care for Medicaid enrollees but do not participate in Medicare have been excluded from the Provider Relief Fund general allotment.

As you and the Administration continue to develop strategies for distributing money from the Public Health and Social Service fund, **our organizations strongly encourage you to provide additional funding to independent and community-based primary care practices, including Medicaid providers. This is absolutely essential to effectively treat patients today and to maintain their ongoing operations until we overcome this public health emergency.** Additionally, we hope you will ensure that any new federal support appropriated by Congress flows to independent and community-based primary care providers in need.

Primary care physicians are working closely with health insurance providers, hospitals, nurses, and many other local partners to overcome this crisis, from providing financial support and accelerating patient care to delivering more flexibility and closer coordination. The Administration has also made important changes, including higher Medicare payments and expanded access to telehealth. But more must be done to support two important roles that primary care physicians and clinicians are playing right now.

First, they are the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic, responsible for screening, diagnosing, triaging and treating patients who are fighting the virus. They also are the primary source of surge staffing for emergency departments and in-patient units overwhelmed by COVID-19.

Second, primary care physicians are doing their best to provide comprehensive care to their existing patients who have ongoing health care needs, including management of chronic conditions, to maintain their health and well-being. These two roles are critically important to individual patients, hardworking families and all of our communities but, more importantly, they are essential to our national efforts to defeat and overcome the COVID-19 crisis. That is why it is so important that community-based primary care physicians immediately access emergency federal support.

We appreciate your hard work at this critical time, and we thank you for your consideration of this important request. We look forward to continuing to work with you and the Administration to ensure that patients are protected and that primary care is preserved.

Sincerely,

Alliance to Fight for Health Care
American Academy of Family Physicians
American Academy of Pediatrics
American Benefits Council
American College of Physicians
America's Health Insurance Plans
Blue Cross Blue Shield Association