

Congress must supply \$100 billion to aid COVID-19 front line care

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What's the news: Congress needs to assist hospitals, physician practices and others in health care that are on the brink of financial collapse so that they can make payroll to front-line health professionals and support staff and ensure that as many inpatient beds as possible are available during the COVID-19 pandemic.

That was the unified message delivered in a letter to congressional leaders from the AMA, American Hospital Association and the American Nurses Association.

“The ability for front-line health care personnel to go to work and provide care to patients will make the difference in whether those who contract COVID-19 and have life-threatening or serious complications from the disease recover or not,” the associations stated in the letter. “America is counting on Congress to provide direct funding to front-line health care personnel and providers, including nurses, physicians, hospitals and health systems, to respond to this pandemic.”

The response has been extraordinary—but so are the costs. The capacity of the nation’s health system is being tested and adequate and immediate financial support is necessary to meet the challenge.

The AMA, in a separate letter, urges additional steps to help preserve the viability of physician practices. In their dual role as care providers and small businesses, practices are struggling to meet the needs of patients and staff due to revenue shortages resulting from deferring visits and procedures and to support the social distancing that is necessary to curb community spread of COVID-19.

To further support physician practice viability, the AMA urges Congress to suspend the 2% payment reduction mandated by the Medicare sequester and to postpone payment reductions called for in the Medicare Merit-based Incentive Payment System program.

The AMA is channeling and speaking for physicians on the front line and removing the obstacles physicians and health systems face in combating this pandemic.

“The nation’s physicians are up to the challenges presented by COVID-19, but they continue to need your support,” AMA Executive Vice President and CEO James L. Madara, MD, wrote in the AMA’s letter.

Why it’s important: Hospitals are losing \$1 million a day as they respond to the pandemic by postponing elective procedures. Meanwhile, staffing shortages have been exacerbated by school closures that cause child care issues for doctors, nurses and support staff.

Physicians, nurses and hospitals are working together to end the COVID-19 pandemic. Speaking in a unified voice, they called on Congress to provide the financial support front-line providers need to combat the public health emergency.

They’re asking Congress to take these specific steps: Create a stabilization fund for emergency expenses, address critical child care needs for front-line staff, and fund the creation of alternative care sites to increase surge capacity.

The stabilization fund would cover:

- | Loss of revenue from postponed elective procedures.
- | Costs for testing, pandemic preparedness training, telehealth training, higher staffing levels, and additional security.
- | Sourcing and purchasing additional—and potentially more expensive—supplies and equipment.
- | Creating and maintaining emergency operation centers.
- | Housing and care for patients who do not require hospitalization but do not have housing in order to prevent spread of COVID-19.
- | Building or retrofitting facilities to provide separate areas to screen for COVID-19.

Regarding child care, the associations said:

- | Ensuring there is quality child care for front-line health care personnel in need will make a critical difference in having more experienced front-line staff available.
- | Child care service can come through direct funding to staff or facilities, or—as some states

are doing—partnering with schools and daycare centers to provide funding.

On surge capacity, the associations' letter states that:

- | Funding for surge capacity is a “crucial step in ensuring we have as much inpatient capacity as possible to respond to the sickest COVID-19 patients.”
- | Outpatient facilities or large community structures near hospitals can house moderately sick COVID-19 patients ensuring sicker patients can be hospitalized and receive the more intensive care they need.

“It is clear that the expenses associated with responding to COVID-19 will be extraordinary,” the nation’s physicians, nurses and hospitals state in the letter. “Based on the initial costs in the states with growing COVID-19 community spread, Congress should allocate \$100 billion to front-line health care personnel and providers, including physicians, nurses, hospitals and health systems, and direct the federal agencies to begin to infuse funds immediately so that they can afford to take the necessary steps to fight the battle against this unseen enemy.”

Learn more: The AMA is teaming with the essential partners in health care to reach the highest levels of government to fight for physicians and patients.

Visit the AMA COVID-19 resource center for a comprehensive place to find the latest resources and updates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization.