

With BA.2 in view, no time to skimp on COVID-19 funding

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What's the news: When Congress passed the massive \$1.5 trillion spending bill earlier this month that assured telehealth flexibilities for the bulk of 2022, the lawmakers left out nearly \$16 billion in COVID-19 relief funds that had been included in an earlier version of the omnibus bill.

Now the AMA is warning that, while COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths are trending downward and pandemic restrictions have been loosened, more congressional funding is needed to help ensure such progress is sustained.

“If we are to continue to minimize the impacts of COVID-19 on our patients and our health care system,

proper funding for COVID-19 mitigation measures and treatment options is critical,” AMA Executive Vice President and CEO James L. Madara, MD, wrote in a letter to congressional leaders (PDF).

“Otherwise, programs offering COVID-19 vaccinations and boosters will be forced to wind down and our ability to secure additional booster doses or possible variant-specific vaccines will be in question.

“Access to essential COVID-19 therapeutics, already in short supply and critical to limit severe illness and hospitalization for the significant number of Americans who remain unvaccinated, will be threatened as the government will be unable to procure additional doses for the general population,” Dr. Madara added. “Lack of funding will also threaten our current COVID-19 testing capacity. Testing availability, which has been a consistent challenge throughout the course of the pandemic, remains a critical tool to help manage the spread of COVID-19.”

More funding is needed to mitigate test shortages and to allow for free or low-cost testing, both at home and from medical laboratories, the AMA's letter says.

Why it's important: Information from Europe and U.S. wastewater surveillance “indicate that we are very likely to begin seeing an increase in COVID-19 cases within the next few weeks as the BA.2 Omicron subvariant begins to constitute a greater share of case numbers at home and abroad,” Dr.

Madara wrote.

“Despite this subvariant’s increased transmissibility, we have the tools available to help limit the spread and limit additional severe illness and death from COVID-19. To do so, however, we must realize that the threat of COVID-19 is not over and provide appropriate funding to ensure the tools we have remain as widely available and accessible as possible.”

Daily case counts in the United Kingdom have more than doubled, and hospitalizations are on the rise.

"Over the last year or so, what happens in the U.K. usually happens here a few weeks later," Anthony Fauci, MD, President Biden's chief medical adviser, recently noted in an interview with NPR.

While many Americans, and their congressional representatives, are understandably exhausted by the pandemic, “our population is still at risk, despite the tools we have,” Dr. Madara warned. He urged lawmakers to “resume bipartisan discussions to craft a new COVID-19 relief package that can be passed swiftly.”

Learn more: Stay updated with the COVID-19 resource center for physicians, which provides the latest news, media coverage, AMA guidance, research, online learning and CME, and essential tools and resources.

Get the latest news on the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccines and variants, and more reliable information directly from experts and physician leaders with the “AMA COVID-19 Update.”

You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version.