

July XX, 2020

The Honorable Alex Azar
Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Azar,

We write to you today to urge you to provide additional funding to our nation's community health centers (CHCs) as they continue to work on the front lines of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. While the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) recently distributed funds in a third round from the Provider Relief Fund (PRF) to hospitals and other safety net providers, CHCs were largely excluded from this disbursement.¹ As such, we request that you continue to monitor the funding needs of CHCs and provide them with additional funding to keep their doors open and to provide critical services to many of our most vulnerable communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also believe that Congress should allocate additional funds to health care providers, including CHCs, to help them stay afloat during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHCs are lynchpins of the nation's health care system and provide a wide array of services to chronically underserved areas of the country. They serve nearly 30 million patients, including over 385,000 veterans, over 8.5 million children, and 1.4 million individuals experiencing homelessness, in thousands of rural, urban, and frontier communities across the United States.² Of the almost 30 million patients they treat each year, nearly 90% are low-income and 63% are racial or ethnic minorities.³ CHCs provide easily-accessible and affordable services, such as dental and behavioral health care to some of the most vulnerable Americans and also help patients access healthy and affordable foods, housing support, and transportation assistance.⁴

The COVID-19 pandemic has only emphasized the importance of CHCs, given they serve as critical health care providers to some of the communities who have been disproportionately

¹ Washington Post, "Safety-net health providers get \$25 billion to help keep their doors open," June 9, 2020, Amy Goldstein, https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/safety-net-health-providers-get-25-billion-to-help-keep-their-doors-open/2020/06/09/94db6c50-aa69-11ea-9063-e69bd6520940_story.html

² National Association of Community Health Centers, "United States Health Center Fact Sheet" <https://www.nachc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/United-States-2282020.pdf>

³ Kaiser Family Foundation, "Impact of Coronavirus on Community Health Centers," May 20, 2020, Bradley Corallo and Jennifer Tolbert, <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/impact-of-coronavirus-on-community-health-centers/>

⁴ National Association of Community Health Centers, "What is a Community Health Center," <http://www.nachc.org/about/about-our-health-centers/what-is-a-health-center/>

affected. Both the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and HHS have acknowledged the key role that CHCs have played during the pandemic and that significant portions of communities most affected by COVID-19 are reliant on them for testing and treatment.⁵ In just one week in June, CHCs tested over 130,000 patients for COVID-19 – 57% of which were racial or ethnic minorities and 69% of those patients tested positive.⁶ Furthermore, 28% of all patients CHCs tested for COVID-19 tested positive for the virus, compared to the national positive test rate of 13%.⁷ It is clear CHCs are serving on the front lines of this crisis and are playing a crucial role in combatting the pandemic. Furthermore, the importance of CHCs will only grow in importance as the United States undergoes another surge of COVID-19 cases and the economic ramifications continue to weigh heavily on our most vulnerable families. With millions of Americans losing their employer-sponsored health insurance and being left without adequate access to health care, they will come to rely on CHCs for affordable and accessible health care treatment.⁸

While CHCs continue to play an outsized role in the COVID-19 pandemic, they have suffered a serious financial toll.⁹ To date, CHCs have received almost \$2 billion from Congress targeted toward pandemic-related testing and treatment. Nothing has been specifically directed to CHCs from the Provider Relief Fund so that CHCs can keep their doors open and help cover revenue losses. Substantial decreases in patient visits have caused significant decreases in revenue for CHCs, threatening their ability to continue to provide care.¹⁰ Each week, 1500-2000 CHC sites must close at least temporarily as a result of financial pressures related to the pandemic.¹¹ Despite these financial struggles, CHCs have been underfunded by distributions of funds from HHS. Last month, a recent HHS distribution of \$25 billion to safety net health care providers offered no funds to CHCs, despite bipartisan calls in Congress on the need to support CHCs and despite the fact that CHCs serve one in five Medicaid beneficiaries.¹² Without additional support, more

⁵ Letter from Dr. Robert R. Redfield, Director, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren.

⁶ National Association of Community Health Centers, “National Findings on Health Centers’ Response to COVID-19,” June 12, 2020, <https://www.nachc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Health-Center-Response-to-COVID-19-Infographic-6.12.pdf>.

⁷ Kaiser Family Foundation, “Impact of Coronavirus on Community Health Centers,” May 20, 2020, Bradley Corallo and Jennifer Tolbert, <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/impact-of-coronavirus-on-community-health-centers/>

⁸ Fortune, “Real unemployment rate soars past 20%—and the U.S. has now lost 26.5 million jobs,” April 23, 2020, Lance Lambert, <https://fortune.com/2020/04/23/us-unemployment-rate-numbers-claims-this-week-total-job-losses-april-23-2020-benefits-claims/>.

⁹ National Association of Community Health Centers, “Health Centers on the Front Lines of COVID-19” <https://www.nachc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Financial-Loss-Fact-Sheet.pdf>.

¹⁰ Kaiser Family Foundation, “Impact of Coronavirus on Community Health Centers,” May 20, 2020, Bradley Corallo and Jennifer Tolbert, <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/impact-of-coronavirus-on-community-health-centers/>

¹¹ Washington Post, “Safety-net health providers get \$25 billion to help keep their doors open,” June 9, 2020, Amy Goldstein, https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/safety-net-health-providers-get-25-billion-to-help-keep-their-doors-open/2020/06/09/94db6c50-aa69-11ea-9063-e69bd6520940_story.html

¹² Washington Post, “Safety-net health providers get \$25 billion to help keep their doors open,” June 9, 2020, Amy Goldstein, https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/safety-net-health-providers-get-25-billion-to-help-keep-their-doors-open/2020/06/09/94db6c50-aa69-11ea-9063-e69bd6520940_story.html; National Association of Community Health Centers, <http://www.nachc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Chartbook-2020-Final.pdf>

CHCs may be forced to close, preventing vulnerable Americans from accessing critical health care.

As the United States experiences a surge in COVID-19 cases and as the economic toll of the pandemic continues to grow, it is imperative these crucial health care providers who treat many of the most vulnerable Americans are provided funds to keep their doors open. As such, we urge you to immediately reverse your decision to exclude CHCs from the PRF and provide these institutions with additional financial support as you continue to distribute these funds.

We appreciate your urgent attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Ayanna Pressley
Member of Congress

Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

Tina Smith
United States Senator

Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator

Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator