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SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENERGY

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT & CLIMATE CHANGE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

March 25, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Leader McCarthy:

As Congress considers further legislation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we urge you to include support for the nation's health care workers who are serving on the frontlines of this pandemic. Front line medical workers not only have a greater risk of exposure because of their direct interactions with patients, but because a shortage of personal protective equipment like face masks and surgical gowns. While they are working tirelessly to treat patients with coronavirus on top of patients with other health needs, they also have the added strain of ensuring they follow strict precautions, so they do not transmit the virus to loved ones at home.

Looking at the past outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), evidence shows that health care workers had a heightened risk of contracting the virus. According to one study, one fifth of all cases globally were health care workers¹. It's critical that these workers are both adequately compensated for the level of risk they incur throughout outbreaks and incentivized to continue to serve patients. During this coronavirus outbreak, our nation's failure to provide health care workers with the proper personal protective equipment (PPE), including N-95 masks, puts them at even more of a risk. Recent reports show how dire the situation has become, with physicians being asked to reuse masks that were designed to be worn only once².

Because health care workers have a greater risk of contracting coronavirus and our nation's health systems will need to expand to meet the growing need for care, Congress must increase the capacity of a workforce that was already facing shortages. Ensuring our nation has the workforce to meet health systems' demands will mean employing creative solutions, like reports

¹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1179/oeh.2004.10.4.421>

² <https://www.businessinsider.com/doctors-new-york-treating-coronavirus-patients-reuse-n95-masks-2020-3>

showing that retired physicians are volunteering to help³. In addition, front line health care workers must manage increased stress while meeting their personal and family obligations. According to an article in Health Affairs, coronavirus stresses include longer work hours, increased patient loads, and concerns about putting their family and loved ones at risk of contracting the virus⁴.

To address the concerns of front-line health care workers and sustain this critical workforce, we request that you consider the following in any upcoming legislative packages:

- **Emergency bonus payments:** Legislation should direct a \$5,000 bonus payment to frontline health care workers and first responders for every month that there is an emergency declaration in the state they practice in. Front line health care workers should include physicians, nurses, physician assistants, nursing assistants, nursing home staff, health care facility workers who come into direct contact with patients.
- **Rapidly expand the workforce:** As coronavirus strains our nation's health care systems, the federal response should temporarily loosen licensing and scope of practice requirements as needed. In addition, the Public Health Service Corps should be rapidly trained and sent to states that are in need of their services. Medical schools, using judgement, should also allow medical students to play certain clinical roles as designated by the hospital.
- **Mental Health Services:** As the coronavirus continues to spread, front line health care workers may benefit from expanded access to mental health services. Legislation should include federal funding for expanded mental health services for front line health care workers, and the mental health professionals treating those individuals should receive a \$5,000 bonus payment noted above.

Communities will continue to rely on front line health care workers as this crisis accelerates, and it's essential that we protect those workers. Congress must sustain the current workforce and take steps now to alleviate the strain that will be placed on these workers moving forward. At a time when they are asked to sacrifice so much every day they serve, health care workers and first responders need our support now more than ever.

Sincerely,



Lisa Blunt Rochester
Member of Congress

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/20/well/live/coronavirus-covid-doctor-nurse-shortage-staff.html>

⁴ <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20200316.393860/full/>



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