March 19, 2020

VIA ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Majority Leader      Minority Leader
U.S. Senate      U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510    Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Speaker of the House      Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives      U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515    Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Minority Leader McCarthy:

On behalf of the American College of Osteopathic Family Physicians (ACOFP), we ask Congress for immediate support and relief to respond to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) national emergency. Our physicians are among those immediately responding to the spread of and working to contain COVID-19.

ACOFP is the professional organization representing more than 20,000 practicing osteopathic family physicians, residents, and students throughout the United States who are deeply committed to advancing our nation’s health care system, including ensuring patients continue to have access to high-quality care in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak. Specifically, primary care physicians (PCPs) are critical to screening, triaging, and directing patients to appropriate care settings when necessary, and maintaining access for individuals needing non-COVID-19 services.

While many patients attempt to go to urgent or emergency care settings for screening services, many of our physician members maintain offices in rural and underserved areas, and are the primary source of such services. For example, PCPs can identify and treat and manage respiratory conditions, reducing the need for patients to be hospitalized or sent to the emergency department. However, many PCP offices are running out of basic supplies needed to help “flatten the curve.” This inevitably will lead to greater numbers of patients being sent to the hospital when they otherwise could have been treated by the PCP on an outpatient basis.

We appreciate the quick action Congress has taken by passing the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act. This bill, coupled with timely and appropriate regulatory guidance, including the Section 1135 waivers, have helped to support health care providers. However, as you consider an additional economic stimulus package, we ask that you ensure this includes a comprehensive funding strategy to ensure physicians, especially those in private practice operating small businesses, are directly supported.
Many of our members have expressed the dire financial situation COVID-19 has placed them in and the great concern they have that they will not be able to continue to serve patients in the community, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Small practices operating with limited staff cannot survive if their offices must close – either due to exposure to COVID-19 or because patients elect to delay primary care services. In addition, some patients, out of an abundance of caution, are calling into the office, consuming already limited staff time with non-reimbursable phone calls. This detracts from patient care for those coming to the office in-person.

Currently, our country faces a significant PCP shortage. **Without direct relief for practicing PCPs, COVID-19 will not only immediately harm patient access, but will also critically damage the future availability of and patient access to PCPs.**

To best address these concerns, we request you make the following direct funding available:

- Guaranteed lines of credit or government loans to ensure physician offices can make payroll and finance current operations;
- Access to no or low interest loans for practices financially struggling due to COVID-19;
- Additional funding and support for practices needing to obtain equipment and supplies to ensure patient and physician safety – this includes ensuring suppliers recognize and deliver needed supplies to PCP offices;
- Government funding so all physicians, especially small businesses and those in rural areas, so they can procure needed technology (e.g., high-speed internet connectivity, two-way audio/visual communication devices, necessary cybersecurity software and hardware) to more effectively deliver telehealth services to patients in a safe and secure manner;
- Grants for physician practices to hire temporary staff or for overtime pay/workforce training in the event staff must be quarantined due to COVID-19 exposure; and
- Medical student loan forbearance option so physicians can delay loan repayments without penalty during this crisis.

These actions will ensure that PCPs can continue to deliver high-quality care to patients, including serving as a vital resource in safely caring for non-COVID-19 patients, and in supporting efforts to screen and triage potential COVID-19 patients.

Thank you for your continued efforts and consideration of this request. Should you need any additional information or if you have any questions, please feel free to contact ACOFP at advocacy@acofp.org or (847) 952-5100.

Sincerely,

Robert C. DeLuca, DO, FACOFP
ACOFP President