

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

November 13, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

As you continue to address the provision of health care during the COVID-19 public health emergency, we ask that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) resolve rural physician training issues that have been exacerbated by COVID-19.

While HHS has taken important steps to shore up the health care system, rural physician training remains at risk. Rural hospitals have been significantly impacted by revenue losses due to lower patient volumes as a result of the public health emergency, and without Federal action, we are concerned that some may be forced to discontinue their physician training programs. In an effort to address this concern, we ask that you support these important programs by releasing targeted support from the Provider Relief Fund established in the CARES Act to fund rural hospitals that train physicians and commit to maintaining these training programs for at least three years.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has reported that “rural training sites may incur higher costs because their training may have to utilize multiple training sites—such as community hospitals or rural health clinics—in order to meet accreditation requirements for resident rotations and patient case-mix. The added administrative work of coordinating with other sites to provide these resources can be a challenge.” Additionally, the data shows that training in rural areas increases the likelihood of practice in rural areas and is associated with a two- to three-fold increased likelihood of rural practice. For example, graduates of Family Medicine Rural Training Tracks practicing in rural areas average approximately 35 percent, which compares very favorably to the current 9 percent of all physicians currently in rural practice.

We are concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on the physician training infrastructure in rural America. Given the economics of rural residency training, as rural hospitals face financial difficulties, a residency program is convenient ballast – easily jettisoned to help the financial bottom line. Even hospitals that do not close may choose to decrease or eliminate their residency program due to its added costs. Prior to the public health emergency, we were facing a significant healthcare workforce shortage in rural areas, and this will be compounded as rural hospitals make

difficult financial decisions. It is critical that we maintain these programs in order to ensure our rural communities have a sustained health care workforce for the future.

As you continue to address the financial needs of the provider community, we request that you include support for the physician training pipeline in rural America. This action will help provide needed care to patients during this emergency and help maintain a physician workforce for the future.

We appreciate your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Brad Wenstrup, D.P.M.  
Member of Congress



Terri Sewell  
Member of Congress

Mike Kelly  
Member of Congress

Lisa Blunt Rochester  
Member of Congress

Cathy McMorris Rodgers  
Member of Congress

Kim Schrier, M.D.  
Member of Congress

Roger Marshall, M.D.  
Member of Congress

Ann McLane Kuster  
Member of Congress

Darin LaHood  
Member of Congress

Derek Kilmer  
Member of Congress

Markwayne Mullin  
Member of Congress

Tulsi Gabbard  
Member of Congress

Gregory F. Murphy, M.D.  
Member of Congress

Alcee L. Hastings  
Member of Congress

Ken Buck  
Member of Congress

Bennie G. Thompson  
Member of Congress

Jeff Fortenberry  
Member of Congress

Peter A. DeFazio  
Member of Congress

Denver Riggleman  
Member of Congress

Mark Pocan  
Member of Congress

Tom Cole  
Member of Congress

Jared Huffman  
Member of Congress

Chris Jacobs  
Member of Congress

Austin Scott  
Member of Congress

Tom Tiffany  
Member of Congress

Rick Crawford  
Member of Congress

Bruce Westerman  
Member of Congress

Dan Meuser  
Member of Congress

Fred Keller  
Member of Congress

Carol D. Miller  
Member of Congress

Glenn "GT" Thompson  
Member of Congress

John Moolenaar  
Member of Congress

Trent Kelly  
Member of Congress

Michael Guest  
Member of Congress

Steve Stivers  
Member of Congress

Dusty Johnson  
Member of Congress