April 7, 2020

Mandy K. Cohen, MD, MPH
Secretary
NC Department of Health & Human Services
2001 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699-20001

Dear Secretary Cohen:

Thank you for your leadership during the COVID-19 crisis. We appreciate your unrelenting efforts through this unprecedented time. We applaud your many actions towards helping keep people safe, including advancing stay-at-home orders, promoting telemedicine, and using surveillance to assess spread. We also appreciate your time this morning to meet with us in a call arranged by Bob Seligson at the NC Medical Society on the dire issue of PPE for primary care.

We want to share with you a survey of our members we completed last week. Our members reiterate concerns that you are often already working to address and we look forward to continuing to work with you on these efforts, including financial health and sustainability of practices, telemedicine, PPE and patient education. This survey is as summarized below and attached.

While clearly this will take ALL of us, a few immediate possible strategies that could be enacted by the Department to further support primary care include:

- Increase the per member per month (PMPM) paid to practices during the crisis
- Outreach to Medicaid members and the general public about the benefits of telemedicine
- Continue the focus on providing information on use and billing and coding of telemedicine
- Continue efforts to secure additional PPE and let us know how we can be helpful in sharing resources and promoting outreach

Findings show that primary care physicians are suffering extreme financial distress. Additionally, they struggle with an inadequate supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), as well as the transition to virtual visits in a very quick time frame. While there is much appreciation for the work that has been done, primary care physicians face substantial immediate challenges in the coming weeks. While there were some differences between family physicians and pediatricians, areas of need were remarkably consistent. However, physician-owned practices faced a more dire financial situation and struggled more to obtain PPE. While practices are reporting unprecedented challenges, they consistently report willingness to find solutions, move forward constructively and continue to work to advance the health of North Carolinians.
KEY TAKEAWAYS

- All primary care practices are facing urgent needs in several different areas, including finances, PPE and telehealth.
- There is an urgent need for PPE in primary care. Physician-owned practices report an even greater need for PPE.
- Almost all primary care practices indicated concerns around the financial impact of COVID-19, with physician-owned practices reporting the greatest need.
- The large majority of primary care practices (90 percent) are working to implement telehealth.
- Practices are very concerned about their own ability and the ability of their patients to use telehealth effectively.
- The large majority of practices are taking drastic actions to lower costs by reducing hours, salaries and/or workforce. Eighty-three percent of respondents reported that their practices were under significant or extreme financial pressure. Physician-owned practices are considering taking even more drastic steps.
- Rural practices are more likely to consider permanent closure or selling their practice.

There is a serious risk that the state will lose primary care capacity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic if immediate assistance is not provided.

Thank you again for your leadership.

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