

COVID-19 Stimulus Bill Must Include Physicians, AAFP Says

Academy, Others Call for Strong Financial Support From Congress

March 23, 2020 03:12 pm [News Staff](#) – Parallel to COVID-19's threat to global health is the sweeping financial crisis it now poses for U.S. physicians working to stem the pandemic. Congress must address both emergencies in its next stimulus legislative package, the Academy and four other organizations told lawmakers in a new letter.



It's a message the AAFP is amplifying with a [Speak Out campaign](http://www.votervoices.net)(www.votervoices.net) that lets members join this extraordinarily urgent call as lawmakers build and debate the stimulus.

The package that next emerges from the Capitol "should support and sustain physicians and their practices during this unprecedented national emergency through tax relief; no-interest loans; direct payments; payment for virtual visits, including phone calls; and other measures," said the [March 20 letter](#).(2 page PDF)

The letter was signed by the AAFP, the AMA, the American College of Physicians, the American College of Surgeons, and the Medical Group Management Association.

It was sent to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., as well as to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky. and Minority Leader Charles Schumer, D-N.Y.

As physicians have attempted to limit patients' exposure, conserve resources and meet accelerating demands for care, they have increased virtual visits -- and are already feeling negative effects due to billing systems, including Medicare's, that focus on in-person visits.

"This is putting severe financial pressure on physicians and their practices, in all types of practice and in all specialties," the letter said. "Practices are experiencing huge reductions in revenue while still having to pay rent, meet payroll and meet other expenses without patients coming into their practices."

To alleviate that pressure, the five organizations urged Congress to

- require all payers, including [Employee Retirement Income Security Act plans](#), to provide coverage and payment for audio-only telehealth visits with patients at the same level as in-person visits;
- provide dedicated and direct financial support to physicians and their practices on the front lines of testing, diagnosing and treating patients at risk for contracting COVID-19;
- and provide dedicated financial support to all physicians who are experiencing adverse economic impact on their practices from suspending elective visits and procedures.

The letter also called on Congress to "ensure that every physician and every health care worker has access to critically needed personal protective equipment."

"The lack of such supplies is placing both physicians and patients at great risk of acquiring COVID-19 and spreading it to others," the Academy and its co-signatories warned. "Eighty-nine percent of physician practices in a [March 19 MGMA survey](#)(www.mgma.com) reported experiencing shortages of critical PPE. The funding that Congress has already approved must be increased, and all possible actions must be taken to increase the capacity to manufacture, acquire and distribute PPE."

The March 20 letter was only the latest in a [surge of Academy advocacy](#) focused on the COVID-19 pandemic. As with previous correspondence calling for swift legislative and regulatory action, this joint correspondence reminded Congress that only properly equipped and financially sustained physicians can halt COVID-19.

"The above steps, combined with other measures to make care affordable for patients at risk of COVID-19, are essential to slowing the spread of the virus and supporting physicians as they honor their sacred obligation to provide care to patients in need, including doing no harm to patients by eliminating elective visits and procedures to minimize patient exposure to the virus."

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