Re: Opioid Epidemic and Equitable Access to Opioid Use Disorder Treatment

Dear Acting Secretary Cochran and Acting Assistant Secretary Coderre,

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, we strongly support efforts outlined by the Biden Administration to advance health equity, address the COVID-19 public health emergency, and to combat the opioid use disorder (OUD) epidemic. We are encouraged by the Administration’s speed in identifying key policies and priorities in response to COVID-19 and to champion racial equality. Respectfully, we urge equal speed in issuing policies to aid in the nation’s efforts to combat the opioid epidemic. To that end, we request that the Administration exercise all available discretion to streamline and reduce requirements that clinicians, already registered to prescribe controlled substances including opioids, must meet before being allowed to prescribe buprenorphine for the treatment of OUD.¹

In January 2020, the American College of Emergency Physicians reported that only 10 percent of all patients with OUD are currently able to access evidence-based treatment.² More recently, the Centers for Disease Control and Public Health (CDC) stated that overdose deaths were already increasing in the months preceding the U.S. COVID-19 public health emergency, and the most recently reported CDC numbers indicate an “acceleration of overdose deaths during the pandemic.”³ There is a growing and urgent need for clinicians who are able to provide evidence-based treatment for OUD, which includes buprenorphine treatment. While the limited number of clinicians authorized to prescribe buprenorphine for OUD negatively impacts access for a growing number of individuals with OUD, this shortage disparately impacts patients in marginalized communities who are uninsured, underinsured, and who face other structural inequalities that combined limit altogether access to medically necessary treatment with dire and increasingly deadly consequences.

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¹ The various requirements to “Become a Buprenorphine Waivered Practitioner” are available here: [www.samhsa.gov/medication-assisted-treatment/become-buprenorphine-waivered-practitioner](http://www.samhsa.gov/medication-assisted-treatment/become-buprenorphine-waivered-practitioner)
³ [Overdose Deaths Accelerating During COVID-19](https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/d1217-overdose-deaths.html), December 17, 2020
The undersigned organizations have experience providing substance use disorder treatment in underserved communities. In addition, OCHIN, a network of community-based clinics continues to produce peer reviewed evidence-based findings on substance use disorder treatment in community-based clinics that underscore the importance of buprenorphine treatment as an option in order to improve equity.\(^4\) The adverse clinical consequences of current federal buprenorphine policy and other onerous requirements are well-documented as individuals in need of treatment face increased morbidity and mortality. Further, the potential risk of buprenorphine treatment contributing to abuse and diversion is dwarfed by the public health benefit associated with increasing the number of clinicians who can provide medical care for individuals in need of substance abuse treatment.

In light of President Biden’s Executive Order that each federal agency must determine “[w]hether new policies, regulations, or guidance documents may be necessary to advance equity in agency actions and programs,”\(^5\) we respectfully request that HHS move swiftly to issue guidelines that would reduce unduly burdensome regulatory burdens that restrict the numbers of clinicians authorized to prescribe buprenorphine for the treatment of OUD. Just as the impact of COVID-19 has fallen heaviest on historically marginalized communities, the barriers to OUD treatment are more pronounced for them as well.

We appreciate your consideration of our comments and as a community-based clinics and providers, we would welcome the opportunity to increase coordination, communication, and engagement to advance equity in accessing medically necessary treatment for substance abuse disorder. Please contact Jennifer Stoll, OCHIN Executive Vice President at stollj@ochin.org should you have any questions.

Sincerely,

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\(^5\) Executive Order *On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government*, January 21, 2021
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