October 29, 2021

Honorable Willian T. McIntee  
Associate Director of Public Engagement  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Re: White House Rural Health Care Providers Listening Session

Dear Associate Director McIntee,

On behalf of OCHIN, I appreciated the opportunity to provide comments and recommendations as part of the White House’s Rural Health Care Providers Listening Session. OCHIN is a national nonprofit health information technology research network that has offered technology solutions, informatics, evidence-based research and best practices, and policy insights for providers in rural and other underserved communities for over 20 years. The challenges rural residents in America face have only grown with the convergence of the COVID-19, mental and behavioral health, and substance use disorder public health emergencies. OCHIN applauds President Biden’s Build Back Better agenda for rural communities and strongly supports efforts to provide rural providers and their patients with resources to ensure equitable and sustainable access to health care. In order to transform access in rural America and to scale these efforts nationally, however, we urge the Administration to explicitly prioritize 21st Century infrastructure investment and publicize information on how to access these new funding resources in a manner that’s clear and accessible to providers and underserved communities.

The OCHIN network includes nearly 1,000 community health care sites with 21,000 providers in 47 states, reaching nearly six million patients. OCHIN works with our network members to improve the integration and delivery of health care services across a wide variety of practices—with an emphasis on community health clinics and small practices, as well as critical access and rural hospitals. Furthermore, OCHIN helps hundreds of health care providers connect to high-speed broadband networks to improve access to quality health care for medically underserved and rural populations, and reduce broadband costs. Over 20 years ago, OCHIN was established to ensure that underserved communities and their providers could leverage economies of scale to afford and access health information technology. OCHIN’s goal remains the same—drive health equity by leveraging technology to overcome structural inequality.

OCHIN’s mission strongly aligns with the Biden Administration’s priorities. There are, however, policy priorities that need amplification and prioritization to ensure that rural communities across the nation will benefit equitably from the latest advances in health information technology, like virtual care and remote patient monitoring. While many of the proposals and programs outlined in the President’s Steps...
to Address COVID-19 in Rural America and Build Rural Health Back Better are critical, scalable health care access today and tomorrow in rural America requires investments in infrastructure that goes beyond traditional brick and mortar buildings. We strongly urge the Administration to prioritize and clarify that investments in health information technology are essential to building and maintaining 21st Century infrastructure that ensures patients in rural communities and their providers have reliable access to these virtual tools and technical support services. This funding should ensure we invest in both virtual capabilities as well as mobile options that leverage connectivity, so patients can access quality care wherever and whenever they need it most.

Further, while the White House Fact Sheets and Provider Listening Session are important tools for communicating opportunities, there remains significant fragmentation and lack of clarity with regard to funding opportunities for rural health care providers and their communities. A federal dashboard for rural funding and programs is needed to facilitate engagement among the least-resourced stakeholders and providers.¹ There are a number of Administration proposals outlined in the recent White House Fact Sheet for rural communities that OCHIN would like to highlight for our network members, while also working with you across several federal agencies and programs to develop innovations in health care delivery—particularly specialty medical care services—across the continuum of providers and which reflect the social determinants of health that effect rural communities.

I welcome sharing with you the work that OCHIN is doing with our network members to increase equitable access to healthcare in rural communities. Please contact me at stollj@ochin.org as OCHIN is able to provide information on rural communities across the nation.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Stoll
Executive Vice President
Government Relations & Public Affairs

¹ For example, the federal governments website related to artificial intelligence is an example of how information can be gathered and disseminated in an accessible manner.