March 20, 2020

Dear Governor Abbott, Commissioner Hellerstedt, and Commissioner Kidd:

Thank you for your leadership and the tremendous efforts you and your staff members are undertaking on behalf of Texas. We write with urgency to convey our concerns about additional steps needed to protect our state’s front-line health care workers.

The escalating COVID-19 pandemic threatens to place unprecedented demands on Texas’ health care system. Texas Public Health Coalition members represent the facilities and personnel caring for Texans infected with COVID-19, along with those who will need care for any other reason. Cancer, heart disease, toothaches, childbirths, and broken arms do not stop during a global pandemic. Physicians, nurses, dentists, and other health care workers need your help. Every health care practice, community clinic, hospital, and other health care facility in our state will bear an intense load due to COVID-19, and we hope to work together swiftly to resolve the most pressing concerns.

The existing shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) such as N95 respirators, surgical masks, goggles, face shields, gowns, gloves, and even basic alcohol-based hand sanitizer puts front-line health care workers at risk and reduces personnel available to meet a surge in demand for care. In Italy, an epicenter of the current COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated 1,700 health care workers have been infected.\(^1\) Such an outcome in Texas would be disastrous and could collapse our state’s health care delivery infrastructure.

From correspondence with those on the ground in Texas, our member organizations are hearing reports of equipment shortages, spontaneous cancellations, months-long backlogs, and price gouging of up to 1,000% above normal cost on orders of PPE. We’d like to take this opportunity to thank the governor and the attorney general for making it clear in a statement that “price gouging is un-Texan” and for using their statutory authority to fully prosecute bad actors during this public health crisis.\(^2\) We are concerned that reserves released from the Strategic National Stockpile will be insufficient to fill current gaps, generating fear and frustration among health care workers. We are aware of efforts currently underway to accelerate PPE production, but we believe additional steps are needed to coordinate rapid deployment of essential equipment to those providing care to COVID-19 cases in diverse patient care settings.

**Recommendations:**

- Continue making expeditious requests for Strategic National Stockpile supplies, including vital PPE, for our state’s front-line health care workers so they are protected and Texans have access to health care now and in the future.
- Leverage all emergency powers afforded by the statewide disaster declaration to facilitate surge production, order fulfillment, and expedited delivery of PPE.
- Explore alternative equipment of at least equal quality to current PPE that is medically approved. This should be done in consultation with experts in infectious diseases and others who are in touch with the needs of front-line health care workers. Identify short-term solutions until additional supplies are received or manufactured, taking into account Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines on the utilization of PPE in short

---

The Texas Public Health Coalition is a coalition of health professional organizations and health-focused organizations dedicated to disease prevention and health promotion.

**Texas Public Health Coalition**

John Carlo, MD, Chair

supply. Collaborate with state and federal authorities to adequately fund and expedite the distribution of acceptable alternative PPE.

- Encourage the attorney general to continue prioritizing swift remedial action in regard to complaints that health care workers have made about price gouging on PPE.
- Establish a web-based state clearinghouse to allow front-line health care workers in hospitals and all other patient care settings, including medical and dental practices of all sizes and locations, to submit their PPE needs in real time.
- Ensure an equitable, transparent, and need-based method to prioritize the distribution of state and local PPE reserves. Make the same arrangement for new equipment as it becomes available, taking into account front-line health care workers with the highest risk of exposure from direct patient care.
- Encourage voluntary donation and redistribution of household and commercial stores of PPE in safe, usable condition.
- Adequately fund and implement a mass public health campaign using all media and communication channels to educate Texans about steps they can take to minimize demand for PPE. These may include the importance of hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene/cough etiquette, social distancing, and self-monitoring for COVID-19 symptoms. They could also include tips on when to seek care, steps for self-isolation and quarantine, and other efforts to prevent community spread and medical surges.

Our coalition is committed to working with elected officials to defend and empower front-line health care workers in Texas who bravely continue to care for patients at elevated risk to themselves and their families. To combat COVID-19 and save lives, we urge you to exercise your governmental authority and take action immediately.

Sincerely,

John Carlo, MD
Chair, Texas Public Health Coalition
Member, Texas Medical Association COVID-19 Task Force

CC: Members of the Texas Legislature