May 20, 2020

The Honorable Earl Blumenauer
1111 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE: Further Congressional action to address COVID-19

Dear Representative Blumenauer,

Oregon’s hospitals and health systems, nurses, physicians and other providers have been on the front lines of our state’s efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. We are extremely proud of and grateful for their extraordinary efforts as they have responded in the face of this unprecedented challenge.

We also recognize that COVID-19 has taken an enormous toll on our state’s health care delivery system and the residents of the communities our members serve. Hospitals increasingly find themselves in dire financial straits. Their revenue has plummeted over the past few months as they curtailed non-essential services – with our support through the government’s request to ensure preparedness – and patients stayed away from health care facilities. In some Oregon communities, hospital revenue has fallen as much as 70 percent compared to a year ago. Hospitals also experienced significant cost increases as they prepared for a potential surge in COVID-19 patients. As a result, numerous hospitals have been forced to lay off or furlough health care workers, which, in turn, has exacerbated the economic fallout from the emergency. We do not know when “normal” will return for our communities, the health care system, and our members.

We greatly appreciate the various COVID-19 relief measures Congress has passed, especially the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the Payment Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act. These have provided valuable resources to our state’s health care delivery system. These resources have been necessary but not sufficient for Oregon.

Additional support and resources are urgently needed to ensure hospitals and their staff can deliver the care needed in their communities. We urge Congress to act quickly to get needed resources into the health care system. These resources should include:

**Additional Funding to the Public Health and Social Services Emergency Fund.** This fund was designed to offset revenue lost by hospitals and cover expenses for health care providers for preparing and responding to COVID-19 that are not otherwise covered. Examples are increased expenses for personal protective equipment, increased capacity, additional health care providers, support staff and pharmaceuticals.

This fund was designed to support the front-line hospitals and other providers who are battling this disease. Funds to cover testing and treatment costs for the uninsured should not be taken from this fund, but should, instead, come from a separate fund. Coverage also could be provided by covering
the cost of coverage through COBRA, opening a special enrollment period for the health care marketplaces, increasing eligibility for federal subsidies for the health insurance marketplaces or expanding the use of health savings accounts.

**Help for Health Care Workers.** Front-line health care workers, including nurses, physicians and emergency responders, have been under extraordinary stress as they have battled COVID-19. We urge Congress to adopt a budget package of relief measures to support them through this crisis. These could include additional pay for front-line workers, funds for child-care and temporary housing, free regular testing, and other benefits.

**Additional Support for Rural Communities.** Rural communities face unique challenges in battling the COVID-19 disease. Facilities often lack the resources needed to handle a surge as well as a lack of physicians, nurses and other health care workers to provide treatment. Emergency medical services agencies are especially vulnerable in rural and frontier communities. These hospitals also have an outsized economic impact on their small communities.

The funds available through the CARES Act are certainly a help to these communities, but they do not address all their needs, especially as the pandemic continues. Additional funding from the Public Health and Social Services Emergency Fund should be dedicated to rural areas.

- Use of telehealth has been a valuable tool under the Medicare waivers granted during the national emergency that has ensured continued access to care. These waivers should be made permanent.
- Telehealth continues to be hampered by insufficient broadband, so it is imperative that we bring our rural communities into the twenty-first century by including funding to expand broadband capabilities.
- Under the Medicare waivers, rural health clinics can now get reimbursed as an originating site; however, the Medicare reimbursement rate is far too low to offset the cost of these services. Medicare should be mandated to reimburse for telehealth services at the Rural Health Clinic (RHC) rate – cost of care.
- RHCs also are required to provide a minimum number of procedures or suffer reduced reimbursement. Due to elimination of non-essential services, many RHCs will not meet this threshold. We urge that this requirement be eliminated at least through the duration of the crisis.

**Support for Access to Care.** Financial stability is critical to ensuring continued access to care. Several measures would help Oregon's hospitals achieve this goal, including loan forgiveness for the Accelerated Medicare Payments, extending special payments to hospitals, and repealing the Institutions for Medical Diseases exclusion until one year after the pandemic.

**Reforms that Prevent Liability Risks for Health Care Professionals.** Throughout this crisis, care has been provided in nontraditional venues and sometimes using nontraditional techniques. In their efforts to save lives, providers have been forced to utilize techniques could potentially expose them to liability risk.

We urge Congress to adopt measures that recognize the heroic efforts providers are making during this crisis and that provide certain kinds of immunity during this crisis.
Our health care system is dealing with a crisis unprecedented in recent history and unimaginable in its breadth and scope. In view of these extraordinary circumstances, we urge Congress to take extraordinary measures to help us combat COVID-19.

Thank you for your ongoing leadership during this time of crisis. As always, do not hesitate to contact us if we can provide additional information or assistance.

Sincerely,

Becky Hultberg
President & Chief Executive Officer
Oregon Association of Hospitals & Health Systems