



Steps Government Should Take to Protect Older Americans & People with Disabilities from Coronavirus

With the passage of an \$8 billion emergency spending package, Congress took swift action to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The legislation includes funding for vaccine development, emergency stockpiles and grants to States and localities for preparedness and response. Still, the risks presented by COVID-19 require that Congress take additional steps to mitigate harms, particularly to those older adults and people with chronic conditions who are most at-risk. To protect individuals living in long-term care settings and to help keep people in the community safely at home, Congress should:

- ❖ **Increase Funding for Nursing Home Surveys and Inspections:** The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) has diverted nearly all surveying resources towards immediate harms and infection control, however, the agency already lacked sufficient resources to inspect nursing homes and other health care facilities before COVID-19. In its FY2021 request, the Trump Administration requested almost \$45 million in additional funding for these vital activities. Congress should provide additional funding for surveys and inspections to ensure nursing facilities are prepared to prevent the virus's spread and treat emerging cases.
- ❖ **Enhance Access to Home and Community-Based Services:** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) instructed older adults and those with chronic conditions to stay home as much as possible to avoid contracting COVID-19. To facilitate access to care and services at home, Congress should provide States increased federal Medicaid funding for Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS). Additional funds would allow States to increase the availability of direct service providers and home health workers, increasing their pay, overtime and benefits; provide services to individuals on lengthy wait lists for HCBS; and purchase needed supplies.
- ❖ **Facilitate Access to Essential Testing, Medicines and Treatment for All Seniors:** Congress should ensure people with Medicare can easily access COVID-

19 testing and treatment, such as by waiving cost-sharing and copayments, lifting prior authorization requirements, easing “early refill” restrictions, offering 90-day supplies and expanding access to helplines and telehealth services.

- ❖ **Make sure Seniors Have Healthy Meals at Home:** With a clear directive to older adults to avoid social settings and crowds, seniors may be less likely to visit senior centers and other community settings for congregate meals. To rectify this, Congress should increase funding and provide flexibility in program eligibility for organizations to administer the Meals on Wheels and congregate meal programs. Additional funds and flexibility would allow providers to purchase, prepare and deliver fresh, frozen or shelf-stable foods to older adults. This has the added benefit of helping to combat social isolation. Congress should also increase funding and flexibility to expand the reach of the Commodity Supplemental Food Program in order to serve more at-risk seniors.
- ❖ **Provide Respite for Family Caregivers who are Helping Keep Seniors at Home:** Without daily access to senior centers, adult day centers and similar programs, family caregivers will inevitably step in to care for older adults and people with disabilities kept at home by COVID-19. To address this, Congress should provide expanded supports for family caregivers under the National Family Caregiver Support Program. With increased funds, States can support more caregivers, including through respite for the caregivers of individuals that are under quarantine.
- ❖ **Ensure COVID-19-Related Content is Accessible:** In order to make sure that states and localities are communicating with all populations about COVID-19, federal funding should be provided to States to create accessible educational materials, videos and audio files. Funds can also be used to ensure all announcements, press conferences and communications by local and State government offices are accessible to the disability community, including through the use of American Sign Language interpreters.
- ❖ **Help Low-Income Seniors Afford Their Health Care Costs:** Under current law, people with Medicare living on fixed incomes are eligible for assistance through programs that cover the cost of their Medicare Part B premiums and out-of-pocket costs. Yet these programs are traditionally severely under-enrolled. In response to COVID-19, Congress should enact legislation to auto-enroll eligible seniors and people with disabilities in existing Medicare low-income assistance programs. This would ensure those who need access to treatment for COVID-19 can afford it.