

April 3, 2020

Mayor Muriel Bowser
Office of the Mayor of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mayor Bowser:

Our three organizations represent a diverse set of physicians and physician practices in the District of Columbia and surrounding area. Our members are the front line of defense against public health disasters, especially the current COVID-19 epidemic. Yet as we work tirelessly to protect residents from this epidemic, our members face massive challenges that could endanger medical care in the District not only now but in the future.

Under this public health emergency, you have the power and ability to protect physicians and the practice of medicine. The following are issues on which your Administration must act immediately:

The Administration must prioritize physicians of all types for COVID-19 testing.

CDC guidance now shows that people infected with the novel coronavirus may be asymptomatic up to 72 hours before showing symptoms. One asymptomatic sick physician could unintentionally infect a hospital or population. The District must create a system that allows any physician to be tested with rapid results, even physicians not affiliated with a health system.

The Administration must equate telemedicine with in-person care for the duration of the emergency.

If social distancing is critical to preserving health care capacity, telemedicine is key to ensuring patients receive care from home. The Department of Health Care Finance has been a leader in telemedicine resources and reimbursement for physicians, but there must be uniformity across public payers, private payers, and ERISA plans. The Administration should via emergency powers ensure all telemedicine regulations apply to all health plans, including equal reimbursement for telemedicine appointments as if they were in-person and loosening of licensing restrictions to allow unrestricted telemedicine treatments across state lines.

Financial support, either in short-term business loans or direct payments, should be made to physician practices and small health care facilities.

Undoubtedly there are many industries and businesses that are essential and need financial support. Physician practices face a similar threat as businesses – dramatic drops in patients means dramatic impact on finances. Independent practices – which are a line of healthcare defense preventing hospital overload – are struggling to operate, meaning the District may see a dramatic drop in community practices. Your Administration can dedicate a specific grant or loan program to help independent practices remain open.

Physicians need physical, legal, and financial protection from COVID-19

We know the District government relies on outside entities for some supplies of PPE, but it is essential health care workers receive the protective equipment they need as soon as possible. As we have seen in other places, lack of PPE for doctors leads to physician illness and death. We ask your administration to specifically detail how the District is acquiring PPE, how it will be distributed, the exact priority for distribution, and what resources are needed to acquire more PPE.

But physicians also need protection from other threats. Your Administration now can issue an emergency order exempting physician decision from liability for medical decisions during the COVID-19 emergency, especially life and death decisions during the pandemic. Physicians should not have to make essential medical decisions while worrying if they will be sued after. New York has issued a similar order, but yours should extend to all treatment decisions related to COVID-19.

We request a response to this letter or a meeting to work with your administration on achieving these goals.

Our members and organizations continue to assist helping the District weather the COVID-19 epidemic. You can ensure the healthcare safety net remains in the District now and in the future.

Sincerely,

The Medical Society of the District of Columbia
American College of Physicians District of Columbia Chapter
District of Columbia Academy of Family Physicians