

HOSPITALS SEEK PERMANENT PANDEMIC FUND, TELEHEALTH REFORMS

Hospitals and providers are looking to the future, calling for a permanent emergency fund for hospitals in case of future emergencies, an investment in public health surveillance and medical supplies, and permanent flexibility to offer telehealth services in recent letters to Congress.

Senate health committee Chair Lamar Alexander (R-TN) released a white paper in June with his recommendations for preparing for the next pandemic.

Both the American Hospital Association (AHA) and the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) wrote to Alexander asking that funding for the Hospital Preparedness Program be increased, pointing to the pandemic as evidence the fund should be revamped. AHA says the fund should go directly to hospitals and health systems so they can adequately prepare for future threats, with funding increased by at least \$750 million a year.

On top of that, AHA calls for establishment of a permanent fund for hospitals and health systems to address future emergencies, much like the hospital relief fund established by the CARES Act.

Both AHA and AAMC also ask for: further improvement of the medical and pharmaceutical supply chains; continued support of vaccine clinical trials; engagement in the private sector for disease surveillance; rebuilding and maintaining the Strategic National Stockpile; improved coordination among federal agencies; a plan to help Americans get back to their routine health care appointments safely; and more emergency preparedness training.

The two groups are also among several provider groups and telemedicine advocates that call for Congress to eliminate the originating site requirement, expand qualifying providers, allow rural health clinics and community health centers to be reimbursed as distant sites, allow reimbursement for audio-only telehealth services where appropriate, and allow face-to-face end-stage renal disease evaluations via telehealth.

AHA also asks that health care coverage gaps to be closed, calling for Congress to: provide employer subsidies to preserve health care enrollment; offer federal subsidies for COBRA; incentivize states that have yet to expand Medicaid with the full federal Medicaid match offered in the early years of the Affordable Care Act; increase eligibility for federal marketplace subsidies; establish a special enrollment period for uninsured individuals; and prohibit insurers from unenrolling individuals who can't pay premiums due to COVID-19-related reasons.

To enhance preparedness for future pandemics, AAMC also proposes that Congress provide funding for a new network of U.S. hospitals to be designated as pandemic centers.

AHA also asked HHS to extend the public health emergency declaration. HHS later said the declaration would likely be extended before it expires on July 26th. ■