June 22, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Minority Leader McCarthy:

As our country continues to deal with the response and impact of COVID-19, it has become increasingly evident that obesity, and its numerous related comorbidities, is the second greatest risk factor, after older age, for hospitalization among COVID-19 patients.\(^1\) Despite the prevalence and severity of obesity in the United States, many public and private health plans, including Medicare, do not adequately cover evidence-based obesity treatment options. Incorporation of the Treat and Reduce Obesity Act (H.R. 1530/S. 595) into the next COVID-19 relief package could make a significant difference in the survival rate for millions of Americans.

More than 93 million Americans of all ages are affected by obesity, which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines as a body mass index greater than 30. Updating Medicare’s coverage policies to support the treatment and prevention of obesity should be part of a comprehensive response to COVID-19. Obesity affects every system of the body, and is associated with diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancers, and over 240 other serious conditions. A report from the CDC reveals that 78 percent of COVID-19 patients requiring admission to an intensive-care unit (ICU) had at least one underlying health condition, many of which were obesity-related diseases.\(^2\) Data from New York City indicate that people with both COVID-19 and obesity are two times more likely to be admitted to the hospital, and people with severe obesity are 3.6 times more likely to require critical care, such as mechanical ventilation.\(^1\)

Americans are also dealing with unprecedented levels of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic, which also adversely affects patients with obesity. Recommendations to stay home may lead to poorer nutrition, decreased physical activity, and reduced access to chronic care management, all of which can contribute to associated health complications. These problems are likely magnified for lower-income individuals with less access to healthy food and opportunities to be active.

In addition, COVID-19 is having a disproportionate effect on racial and ethnic minorities. While data are still being collected and analyzed, the CDC reports that 33 percent of hospitalized patients were black, suggesting this population may be disproportionately affected.\(^3\) This population also has the highest prevalence of obesity, at 39.1 percent. In North Carolina, the rate is even higher, at 42.7 percent.\(^4\) This same story can be told about a majority of U.S. states. To combat COVID-19, it will be important to understand and address these disparities within our population.

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Congress has been considering the Treat and Reduce Obesity Act for nearly a decade. This legislation has demonstrated strong bipartisan support. It will enhance Medicare beneficiaries’ access to the healthcare providers that are best suited to provide intensive behavioral therapy and allow Medicare Part D to cover FDA-approved anti-obesity medications. Updating this Medicare coverage will not only ensure beneficiary access to additional obesity treatment options, but could pave the way for other health plans to follow suit.

While Congress and the Administration have taken action to increase access to telehealth, enhance state flexibility under Medicaid, and appropriate hundreds of billions of dollars to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, comprehensive treatment for obesity is still not reimbursed by Medicare or many other health plans. Please help address this significant driver of COVID-19 morbidity and mortality by incorporating the Treat and Reduce Obesity Act into the next COVID-19 relief package.

Sincerely,

Alcee L. Hastings  
Member of Congress

David P. Roe, M.D.  
Member of Congress

Bonnie Watson Coleman  
Member of Congress

George Holding  
Member of Congress

Gus Bilirakis  
Member of Congress

Julia Brownley  
Member of Congress

Ted Budd  
Member of Congress

Tony Cárdenas  
Member of Congress

Steve Cohen  
Member of Congress

TJ Cox  
Member of Congress

Dwight Evans  
Member of Congress

Brian Fitzpatrick  
Member of Congress

Bill Flores  
Member of Congress

Vicente Gonzalez  
Member of Congress

Richard Hudson  
Member of Congress

Will Hurd  
Member of Congress

Bill Johnson  
Member of Congress

Hank Johnson  
Member of Congress

Mike Johnson  
Member of Congress

John Katko  
Member of Congress

John B. Larson  
Member of Congress

Al Lawson  
Member of Congress

David McKinley  
Member of Congress

Carol D. Miller  
Member of Congress

Gregory F. Murphy, M.D.  
Member of Congress
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