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May 13, 2020

The Honorable Tate Reeves
Governor, State of Mississippi
400 E. High Street
Jackson, MS 39201

Dear Governor Reeves:

The Mississippi Academy of Family Physicians, representing 1,344 physicians, residents and students across the state of Mississippi, would like to express our support of your leadership in this time of crisis. Primary care practices in Mississippi are the frontline of our state's healthcare system and many of them are facing significant financial challenges due to COVID-19. As patients stay home and fee-for-service revenue dries up, practices are laying off employees and facing the prospect of closure. This is a dire situation. When this crisis is behind us, today's imminent closures would likely constrain the availability of primary care, which threatens the health of all Mississippians in the long-run.

In an effort to protect patients and providers, family physicians have drastically changed their practices, decreasing in person visits and shifting to telehealth and other methods of providing care. Further, family doctors are leaders in working with their community organizations to cope with their own changes needed for adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic. In many practices, 20% or less of visits remain in person today, yet family physicians are busier than ever providing care for their patients and communities. Family doctors are working daily: reaching out to isolated patients with mental health challenges, guiding patients with respiratory symptoms on how to care for themselves at home instead of going to emergency rooms, and encouraging older patients to document their wishes for end of life care in case of hospitalization and/or severe illness. Reimbursement for Telehealth has helped replace some lost revenue, but not nearly enough, with practices seeing a decline by as much as 50%-80%.

In a recent survey of Mississippi Academy of Family Physicians members, almost 80% of family doctors in the state are seeing COVID-19 patients. Alarmingly, 90% indicate their patient load has decreased since February. Family Physicians are resilient and have been creative in being able to modify their delivery of care. From curbside to home visits to the addition of telehealth, they are working continually to be able to provide safe and effective care to their patients. However, these safeguards come with a price tag, which combines with decreased revenue to mean that more than half of those surveyed indicated the current financial status of their practice is, or will soon be, dire. Almost all surveyed have had to institute layoffs or furloughs along with reduced salaries

MISSION: Supporting Family Medicine physicians as they improve the health of all Mississippians.

and hours, and forced unpaid leave. Physician practices are adapting to the modifications needed for providing care in a world with COVID 19, but personal protective equipment is now a daily use item rather than something purchased sporadically to have on hand in case of need. Hand sanitizer and cleaning supplies are increasingly hard to come by, more expensive and yet mandated to be used more frequently. Some clinics are requiring physical modification to meet spacing requirements, while others invest in technology to meet their telehealth needs. All of this is being done to adapt and provide for patients, in an environment where the revenue to fund it is at all- time lows.

Given that federal stimulus packages have not directly allocated funding to small or independent practices, it is projected that up to 60,000 primary care practices in the United States may close or scale back significantly. Mississippi spent the last decade trying to expand its primary care workforce through the Mississippi Rural Physicians Scholarship Program and the Office of Mississippi Physician Workforce, but we have not met the goal or the need yet. Mississippi's primary healthcare landscape simply cannot afford even one physician's office to close. More than half of primary care practices in Mississippi are small businesses that lack the financial recourse to withstand this economic force for more than two months.

We respectfully ask that you help address the needs and expenses of family physicians by considering any of the following:

1. Reimbursement for the additional personal protective equipment (PPE) and sanitation measures or funding to purchase the required PPE for reopening and continuing medical practice in Mississippi; and/or
2. Create a Mississippi Private Practice Recovery Grant Program up to \$100 million for physicians who have not received stimulus money in order for them to be able to continue to provide healthcare in Mississippi while maintaining the necessary staff associated with private practice

Losing primary care poses a direct threat to the viability of community hospitals, the health of our communities, and the workforce that drives our economy. Our state's acute and chronic disease burden – managed over time by primary care teams- has not disappeared during COVID-19. Leaving heart disease, diabetes, mental illness, cancer, and other chronic disease unaddressed due to the lack of access to primary care will diminish the quality of life for many. Effective primary care after COVID-19 could be critical for minimizing unnecessary emergency room visits and hospitalizations, which are expensive. A large body of literature links primary care to better health, longer life, lower spending, and great equity in health.

We ask that you take these steps to protect the family doctors who are working daily, and frankly, due to lack of adequate PPE, are risking their lives to care for the citizens of Mississippi. We look forward to working with you and addressing the needs of family doctors in your community.

Sincerely,



William M. Grantham, MD
President

On behalf of MAFP Board of Directors