April 03, 2020

The Honorable Alex Azar
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

The Honorable Seema Verma
Administrator
Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services
7500 Security Blvd.
Baltimore, MD 21244

Dear Secretary Azar and Administrator Verma:

We write to you today with grave concerns regarding your administration’s recent decision not to reopen the state-level health insurance exchanges run by the federal government. Yesterday, the Labor Department reported that unemployment claims soared to a record 6.6 million due to the COVID-19 public health crisis and ensuing economic fallout. With growing fears that people will be uninsured during the coronavirus outbreak, we urge you to allow individuals who are at-risk for COVID-19 to access affordable health care options through the health insurance marketplaces with a special enrollment period.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2017 the number of people without health insurance increased to 28.0 million, up from 27.3 million the year before. Of that number, about 1 in 3 uninsured workers were in service occupations. Despite individuals qualifying for a special enrollment period for losing job-based coverage, 1 in 3 Americans will remain uninsured.\(^1\) Given the crisis at hand, CMS should authorize an emergency special enrollment period to ensure that all Americans have access to affordable health insurance that will cover needed health care services for testing and treatment, especially now.

The federal government has opened special enrollment periods in the past during previous declared major disasters or emergencies, claiming exceptional circumstances.\(^2\) On January 31, 2020, Secretary Azar declared a nationwide public health emergency under Section 319 of the Public Health Service Act. As of Friday afternoon, more than 258,000 people in the United

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States have been infected, and at least 6,593 have died—the COVID-19 pandemic should be considered an exceptional circumstance.³

Medical costs are already a common concern in the U.S., particularly for people without insurance. The Kaiser foundation projects that the cost of inpatient admissions for COVID-19 treatment could top $20,000⁴. This is an unprecedent financial constraint that could prevent millions of people from seeing doctors to get tested or treated. We urge HHS and CMS to establish a special enrollment period for the coronavirus and rightfully extend the opportunity for millions of uninsured Americans to newly seek out coverage.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue and we look forward to your response.

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Nydia M. Velázquez              Rosa L. DeLauro
Member of Congress              Member of Congress

/s/ Jackie Speier      /s/ Bobby L. Rush
Member of Congress              Member of Congress

/s/ Tim Ryan       /s/ Gwen Moore
Member of Congress              Member of Congress

/s/ Juan Vargas         /s/ John B. Larson
Member of Congress              Member of Congress

/s/ Bonnie Watson Coleman  /s/ Steve Cohen
Member of Congress              Member of Congress

/s/ Jim Cooper        /s/ Ayanna Pressley
Member of Congress              Member of Congress

/s/ Terri A. Sewell      /s/ Yvette D. Clarke
Member of Congress              Member of Congress

/s/ Peter A. DeFazio   /s/ Adriano Espaillat
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/s/ Donald M. Payne, Jr.
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/s/ Tony Cárdenas
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