February 18, 2020

Congressional Black Caucus
Rep. Karen Bass, Chair
February 18, 2020

Dear Rep. Bass,

Thank you and all Members of the Congressional Black Caucus for your leadership on issues of importance to Black Americans, specifically regarding access to quality healthcare. Americans of color are too often an afterthought in our political process, and I am grateful for all the CBC does to represent us on Capitol Hill. It is especially important during this distressing chapter in our nation’s history.

I gathered with Black leaders in Charleston this week in advance of South Carolina’s primary to attempt to shed some light on healthcare issues I feel are being under-addressed in the 2020 presidential race. I want to share some of these same ideas and themes with you, our leaders in Congress, as Republicans continue to push policies that favor big healthcare corporations instead of patients, especially those of color.

We discussed access to mental healthcare in Black communities, as well as the need for more Black healthcare providers, specifically in the mental health space. We also talked about the need for equality in the way we care for our pregnant women and new mothers; Black women are three to four times more likely to die from childbirth-related complications.

I am currently very focused on the surprise medical billing issue, one that is extremely significant to minority patients. South Carolina healthcare leaders joined me on the panel to raise awareness around an issue that is literally leaving our people homeless. Black Americans are more likely to be hit with exorbitant medical bills that they are unable to pay because their insurers are unwilling to cover these costs.

In my remarks, I focused on Sen. Lamar Alexander’s legislation, which would require patients and doctors to sort out these costs between themselves – effectively cutting insurance companies out of paying for them altogether.

In July 2019, the House Energy and Commerce Committee reported out a product which mirrors the Alexander bill. Unfortunately, like its Senate Republican counterpart, it protects Big Insurance companies at the expense of black patients and the medical care they rely upon. The answer in any House legislation is for Big Insurance to live up their obligations and pay these medical bills. Congress—
especially a Democratic House majority – should not be in the business of bailing them out. Unfortunately, the House Energy and Commerce Committee bill does just that. Big Insurance doesn’t need a bailout at the expense of Black patients.

In Charleston, I heard stories of those who were left on the brink of homelessness due to unimaginably high insurance premiums on top of surprise medical bills. Why are both parties in Washington, DC lining up behind legislation that would allow insurance companies to protect their billions in profits while low-income Americans are left holding the bag?

I urge you, and all Members of the CBC, to tackle these issues in a way that prioritizes those who need your help the most. No more Republican assaults on affordable healthcare. No more bipartisan bows to Big Insurance.

I am hopeful that we had an impact on the presidential race this week in South Carolina. Lord knows we can use all the attention we can get. I am eternally grateful to the CBC for continuing to work hard for us in Washington, and stand ready to offer any advice and guidance I can regarding the issues affecting those I am talking to and working with around the country every day.

Sincerely,

Rev. Al Sharpton

CC: Congressional Black Caucus
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    Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton
    Rep. Maxine Waters
    Rep. Sanford D. Bishop
    Rep. James E. Clyburn
    Rep. Alcee L. Hastings
    Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson
    Rep. Bobby L. Rush
    Rep. Bobby Scott
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