

April 23, 2020

The Honorable Eric Hargan, Esq.
Deputy Secretary
Department of Health & Human Services
200 Independence Ave, S.W.
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Hargan:

On behalf of the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP) and the Emergency Department Practice Management Association (EDPMA) thank you for taking the time to speak with us regarding the urgent need for financial support of the front line emergency physicians who are the safety net of professional emergency care for the nation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically altered the need for emergency care across the country. In some areas, such as New York City, the pandemic has overwhelmed the capacity and capability of our emergency departments and hospitals. There have been overwhelming numbers of sick patients and sadly, many have died alone, isolated from their families, and comforted only by the bedside caregivers in the emergency department. Many emergency physicians have rallied to support our colleagues in these locations, however the toll on the emergency department physicians, together with the rest of the healthcare team in the emergency department has been heavy and will likely affect them for years to come. Importantly, it will affect their ability to provide ongoing care in the midst of this unprecedented crisis. We need help to ensure that the safety net is there for patients and will support our nation's prompt recovery.

Paradoxically, in other areas of the country, the burden of disease has been low, but the effect on reducing the number of patients seeking care in the emergency department has been dramatic. During the first few weeks of the growing pandemic, we saw decreases of emergency department volumes of ~30%, which now at the height of the pandemic, have reached at least 50% in many areas of the country. These decreased volumes (and the attendant reductions in revenues for physician practices) have threatened the ability to sustain the levels of physician staffing required for not only short-term response, but long-term recovery.

We know that the primary driver of these dramatic decreases in patient volume is the fear of infection and safety. The public lacks confidence in the health care system's ability to address their health care needs safely. We want to work with you to restore that confidence appropriately, and quickly.

In the meantime, here are sobering statistics we have gathered. This is our starting point.

The data below collected by EDPMA is information collected from emergency department member provider groups and is reflective of national trends:

Number of Emergency Departments: 1,295

Number of Emergency Department Visits (2019): 32,750,000

Number of Emergency Physicians: 14,060

Number of Nurse Practitioners / Physician Assistants: 7,337

Decrease in Emergency Department Volumes March 2019 vs. March 2020 = -41%

These reductions in emergency department visits are due to a large degree from the efforts related to social distancing and people staying safe at home. Unfortunately, some of the patients are not coming to the emergency department because they are lacking confidence that the healthcare system is safe. Their concerns are centered around the possibility of being infected with COVID-19 and that hospitals do not have appropriate PPE and staffing to protect them. We want to work with you to restore that confidence. To that end, ACEP has initiated a campaign and released resources aimed at educating the public about when to seek emergency treatment and emphasizing the extensive training and protocols in place to protect our emergency departments and communities.

Despite the dramatic decreases in emergency department volumes, emergency provider groups have increased operational expenditures to ensure that all emergency departments have the capability to rapidly screen, evaluate, and treat patients - both with and without symptoms - that are potentially due to COVID-19. These extra expenses include but are not limited to:

- Protecting individual physicians by providing salary protection while under required quarantine after COVID-19 exposure
- Increased cost of preparing for surge staffing to replace quarantined providers
- Maintaining minimum physician staffing levels require for patient and public health needs
- Staffing additional and alternative care sites and telehealth capabilities, even when there is no mechanism for reimbursement for these critical services
- Purchasing PPE for our physicians when the hospital could not do so

As the physicians who serve as the safety net for the nation both during this pandemic and a 24/7/365 basis, we are asking for your immediate consideration of our request for relief support from the CARES Act Provider Relief Fund. Our organizations have submitted for your consideration a request for funding relief on behalf of all the emergency physicians across the nation who are continuing to be the frontline professionals caring for all patients who require emergency care. The request for funding relief is based upon data and modeling that we believe to be fair and representative of the needs of the emergency physicians to continue to serve as the safety net throughout this pandemic, including additional waves of the disease, and beyond.

We again appreciate the opportunity to discuss our request with you and look forward to continuing discussions on this request. If you require any additional supporting data regarding the experiences of emergency departments during the pandemic, please contact us and we will be happy to provide that to you. In addition, we look forward to the opportunity to work with the Department in future discussions on how to improve the ability of the healthcare system to work in partnership with the federal and state governments to ensure that critically needed supplies and equipment reach the hospitals where they are most needed in response to a public health emergency.

Most of all, thank you for your heartfelt and earnest attempts to bring our patients the care they need in this unprecedented crisis. We stand with you.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "William Jaquis". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "W" and "J".

William P. Jaquis, MD, FACEP
President
American College of Emergency Physicians

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bing Pao". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "B" and "P".

Bing Pao, MD, FACEP
Chairman of the Board
Emergency Department Practice Management Association