RE: Supports for Frontline Home Care and Home Health Workers

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Minority Leader McCarthy:

Home care professionals have long proven to be an essential support providing care to millions of Americans every year. The compassionate care these workers provide enables their patients to maintain their dignity and independence in their own homes. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has deeply impacted the ability to both receive and provide care in the home. With home care, the risk of transmission of the virus that exists in institutional settings is avoided along with the higher cost of care. The frontline home health workforce has stepped up during the pandemic, with thousands of home care aides, nurses, therapists, and other clinicians providing direct care on a daily basis those individuals infected with the virus as well as those at high risk.

While the many actions taken by Congress and the Administration have been helpful and are very much appreciated, additional supports are still necessary to ensure for the continuation of home-based care delivery. Key among these needed supports is essential workforce compensation and the need to overcome the current incentivization of unemployment compensation where many direct care workers earn less than they would garner under CARES Act unemployment supports.

As you consider supports for frontline health care workers during the pandemic, it is imperative that certain principles be followed to secure an equitable, effective, and efficient program that protects and incentivizes employment in the delivery of home care.
Financial support needs to be sufficient as to acknowledge the added risk that these essential workers are engaging in. An essential workforce benefit would need to exceed FPUC benefit to overcome its incentive to be unemployed.

To meet the expanding need for a home care workforce funds should be allocated for the recruitment of new workers to the field. Home care has long faced workforce shortages that have only been exacerbated by the PHE. A recruitment bonus will help draw new workers to the field.

All home care disciplines providing direct care should be eligible for essential worker pay. Each of these care disciplines is essential to the health and safety of patients.

The administration of the enhanced financial support must be delivered with expediency and maximized efficiency, and aligned with payroll schedules when possible. This will ensure workers enjoy the satisfaction of their efforts and added workplace risk. This will also serve as a continued motivation to perform this vital work.

The administration burden on both employers and employees should be minimized. Home care workers need to be focused on delivering high quality care and taking precautions to minimize the chance of virus spread. Employers have likewise taken on added COVID-19 responsibilities.

Home care employers tend to operate on very narrow financial margins and limited capital. As such, employer cash flow can not be impeded in carrying out this program.

With regard to workforce availability, the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC) provision within the Coronavirus, Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act created an additional unemployment benefit of $600 per week for eligible individuals. While this provision was backed with good intent, it has created an unintended consequence where in certain situations it financially incentivizes an individual, who might otherwise be a home care worker, to remain unemployed. In situations such as this, it is much a better outcome if this funding were instead used to incentivize workers to stay on the job, providing care to some of our most vulnerable citizens. Home care professionals have proven to be every bit as essential as their colleagues working in hospitals and as first responders. In the absence of their health care services, the 12 million people annually under their care are at risk of a serious deterioration of their condition, triggering needs for more costly care, likely in a hospital or other institutional care setting. At the same time, these essential health care professionals routinely face the risk of acquiring the Covid-19 infection, not only by directly serving infected patients, but by needing to be actively out in the community on a daily basis. As a consequence of their great work, there are growing reports of home care workers who have contracted the disease, some of whom have unfortunately succumbed to the virus’s effects.

COVID-19 infection risks have compounded the pre-existing workforce shortages in home care. Additional support is imperative to bolster and retain this workforce through the extent of the Public Health Emergency (PHE). Given that these workers are at an increased chance of exposure, it is only fair and reasonable that they be rewarded as such. Medicaid and other government-based health care programs provide insufficient payment rates to support improved compensation to these workers. At the same time, elderly and disabled private pay patients can not be realistically expected to offset the amount necessary to reward a home care worker’s added risk. Congress and the Administration needs to take action to provide for frontline and essential worker improved pay, as well as funding for the recruitment of additional workers.

We very much appreciate the incredibly difficult work that is before the Congress. Your continued efforts have provided great support to our nation in the face of a pandemic unprecedented in
our time. We look forward to your consideration of our requests to bolster the home care workforce. Should you have any questions please contact Calvin McDaniel (cmcdaniel@nahc.org) with NAHC or Patrick Cooney (Patrick@federalgrp.com) with HCAOA.

Very truly yours.

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