



COLLEGE of AMERICAN PATHOLOGISTS

February 10, 2021

The Honorable Frank Pallone
Chairman
Energy and Commerce Committee
United States House of Representatives
2107 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Ranking Member
Energy and Commerce Committee
United States House of Representatives
1035 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Pallone and Ranking Member Rodgers:

The College of American Pathologists (CAP) is pleased to provide feedback on the latest COVID-19 relief package being proposed by the Energy and Commerce Committee. We appreciate your continued efforts to combat and address the ongoing impacts of the pandemic. As you move forward with the next relief package, we urge you to include increased resources for testing, support for expanding laboratory capacity, and assistance to states in fighting this pandemic.

As pathologists are the physician specialists who diagnose disease. CAP members and the laboratories they direct have worked tirelessly since the coronavirus outbreak to bring new COVID-19 tests online in communities throughout the United States. Pathologists also play an integral role in the diagnosis of cancer (breast, prostate, cervical, leukemia, kidney), and medical diseases such as hepatitis and cirrhosis. The expertise our members provide drives treatment decisions that optimize outcomes for patients. Yet, the pressures faced by pathologists and the rest of the laboratory workforce have increased over the course of the pandemic. As a result of the public health crisis, many pathologists are seeing an increase in staff burnout and continued financial losses, which threatens the viability of practices and ability to deliver optimal health care to patients. Now more than ever, patients and their treating physicians are relying on the expertise of pathologists to meet increasing diagnostic testing needs and achieve healthier outcomes for all Americans.

Resources for Testing

Unfortunately, COVID-19 infection remains uncontrolled across the country while the nation is trying to reopen. Further, despite the development of much needed vaccines, several more contagious strains of COVID-19 are spreading rapidly, including in the United States. Testing and analysis by pathologists is imperative to arresting the spread of the disease and its variants. At the same time, testing is also a necessary and important component of reopening our economy and schools safely. As such, it is critical that Congress expand its investments to ensure timely and accurate testing and increased testing reimbursement. Specifically, the CAP supports the committee's inclusion of \$46 billion in funding for COVID-19 testing and the implementation of a testing strategy that supports investments in laboratory capacity. In addition to the specified activities outlined by the committee, we would emphasize that these funds should be used for a broad range of tests, including SARS-CoV-2 nucleic acid tests, for a variety of communities and practice settings. For example, academic medical centers and smaller community hospitals are important because they serve their



local communities in a timely fashion by keeping testing close to the population served.

While testing capacity in the United States has increased dramatically, there is room for further improvement. Surveys of laboratory directors have consistently reported excess overall testing and instrument capacity but they are being constrained by several limitations. Laboratory directors cite problems acquiring testing supplies, particularly test kits, plastic pipette tips (which are also used to test for other diseases, including sexually transmitted infections), and specimen acquisition swabs and transport media as the greatest barriers to increased testing. For example, smaller health systems continue to struggle to get supplies, which limits capacity for rapid testing for triage in emergency room departments, placement in behavioral health and psych programs, and testing for women who are in active labor. Hence, we also support the use of the \$46 billion for the investment in laboratory capacity to develop, manufacture, procure, and distribute tests, personal protective equipment (PPE), and other supplies necessary for COVID-19 testing.

We also support the \$1.75 billion in funding for the CDC for activities related to genomic sequencing but would emphasize that this work should be done broadly, including academic medical centers and other facilities capable of performing this evaluation. It is critical for the United States to increase viral sequencing and genomic surveillance to respond to the evolving challenges of the pandemic. As you are aware, multiple new SARS-CoV-2 variants have emerged in our nation. It is crucial for the U.S. to identify, track, and trace these new variants to mitigate the impact of emerging strains. Congress needs to support and expand funding to boost viral sequencing and genomic surveillance. Related, we also support the committee's inclusion of \$500 million to allow CDC to "establish, expand, and maintain a data surveillance and analytics infrastructure and to modernize the U.S. disease warning system to forecast and track hotspots for COVID-19," and the \$750 million to support CDC's efforts to combat COVID-19 globally.

Public Health Workforce

We support the Public Health Workforce provisions that include \$7.6 billion to HHS for efforts related to establishing, expanding, and sustaining a public health workforce, and to make awards to state, local, and territorial public health departments. Workforce investments that include laboratory personnel are an important piece of the Nation's ability to address the pandemic. Additionally, we urge the committee to include support for medical examiners. Medical examiner offices have faced unprecedented challenges to complete death investigations and examinations. Forensic pathology services have had a key role in understanding the effects of COVID-19 and informed treatments as the country progressed throughout 2020. As deaths increased, medical examiners and coroners further assisted communities in this public health crisis with their expertise in handling the deceased by, for example, meeting needs for increased body transport and storage. The CAP encourages Congress to support efforts to extend federal funds addressing the fiscal impacts of the pandemic, which include support for medical examiner services that are often overlooked.



Vaccines

Regarding vaccination efforts, the CAP can serve as a resource to reinforce guidance and best practices from the CDC and other agencies. For example, following the approval of the COVID-19 vaccine in December the CAP issued a statement encouraging its members to take advantage of access to the vaccine and complete the course for inoculation. The CAP has issued guidance to the public on serology testing. Each communication focuses on the facts, evidence, and scientific rationale for public health guidance to assist state and local governments and an informed citizenry to make the right decisions.

The CAP also supports congressional efforts to invest in vaccine distribution and guarantee all Americans have access to the vaccine without patient cost sharing. Specifically, the CAP supports the committee's inclusion of \$7.5 billion in funding for the CDC, funding for education related to vaccination, and funding for vaccine and therapeutic supply chain improvements. The CAP urges Congress to do everything in its power to support improvements to sustained manufacturing surge capacity and capabilities to produce needed medical countermeasures, such as vaccines and therapeutics, in response to future public health threats like COVID-19.

Summary

As Congress works to further address the COVID-19 pandemic, we urge you to consider support for increased resources for testing, expanding laboratory capacity, adopt plans to address health disparities, and assist states in fighting this pandemic.

The current pandemic has brought to the forefront the vital role of pathologists and the value that they bring to medicine. Pathologists are integrally involved in direct mitigation of the COVID-19 crisis including testing for accurate and timely diagnosis, as well as investigation of potential cures. Now more than ever, patients and their treating physicians are relying on the expertise of pathologists.

We welcome the opportunity to work with you to address these issues to accelerate the discovery, development, and delivery of cutting-edge medicine and treatments for all Americans. Please contact Sarah Bogdan via email at sbogdan@cap.org or via phone at (401) 316-5144 if you have any questions regarding these comments.

Sincerely,

Patrick Godbey, MD, FCAP
President