

April 29, 2020

The Honorable Henry McMaster
Governor
State House
1100 Gervais Street
Columbia, SC 29201

Dear Governor McMaster:

As you continue to develop and implement plans for reopening South Carolina's economy in the coming weeks and months, scaling up our state's testing capacity will undoubtedly play a crucial role in mapping out and navigating the road to recovery. While gaps remain, I applaud the work of your administration, the S.C. Public Health Laboratory, private labs, and healthcare providers throughout the state in substantially expanding testing initiatives thus far. Last week, Congress took a decisive step to bolster these efforts through an unprecedented \$25 billion investment in the nation's testing infrastructure. Moreover, in order to avoid one-size-fits all prescriptions, we allocated \$11 billion of the funding appropriated explicitly for the states, facilitating flexible solutions tailored to particular needs. As you strategize how best to allocate the testing-focused funding and supplies that you receive, I ask that you prioritize, among other areas, rapid point-of-care testing capacity for long-term care facilities and other providers serving disproportionately older South Carolinians, as well as expanded testing access for communities of color and populations with a high prevalence of underlying health conditions.

Studies from across the globe continue to confirm that seniors who contract COVID-19 face a troublingly high risk of severe illness, making safety and surveillance initiatives at long-term care facilities and other providers serving our seniors all the more imperative. The Kaiser Family Foundation recently reported that, among states reporting relevant data points, long-term care facility residents and staff accounted for roughly 27% of COVID-19-related deaths and 11% of cases. In South Carolina, as of April 23, 435 COVID-19 cases had been identified across 56 nursing homes, rehabilitation facilities, and community residential facilities, with at least 28 coronavirus-related deaths reported in these centers. Fortunately, emerging research suggests that more proactive testing policies and enhanced access could meaningfully reduce these unnerving figures. Recent modeling spearheaded by Imperial College London, for instance, found that using rapid point-of-care tests to screen nursing home and healthcare workers every week could reduce these individuals' contribution to transmission by around 25%. While restrictions on visits and other infection control measures will play a valuable role in preventing further outbreaks at senior care facilities, providers that serve substantial shares of older Americans need consistent and sustainable access to high-quality rapid point-of-care tests in order to immediately identify and address potential COVID-19 cases.

In addition to prioritizing providers caring for older Americans, I ask that you allocate robust resources to building testing capacity among underserved communities, communities of color, and communities with a high prevalence of health conditions linked to severe COVID-19-related illness and death. As reported by CDC, data from the COVID-NET surveillance initiative showed that close to 90% of

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hospitalized COVID-19 patients in the catchment population had at least one underlying health condition. Among other common comorbidities, nearly half of hospitalized patients had hypertension, while more than one-quarter had diabetes, and close to one-fifth had asthma. Many of these conditions disproportionately affect people of color and lower-income Americans. Both national and state-specific data indicate that African Americans are overrepresented among hospitalized patient populations and fatalities, as well as cases in general. As of last week, Black South Carolinians accounted for 43% of COVID-19 cases and 56% of COVID-19-related deaths, despite comprising just 27% of the state's population. With these disparities and heightened health risks in mind, I ask that you continue to leverage safety-net providers like community health centers, along with drive-through testing sites and other appropriate models, to expand testing among communities of color and communities with a high prevalence of underlying health conditions linked to severe COVID-19-related illness and mortality.

Securing, allocating, and distributing funding and supplies from the federal government's \$25 billion investment will present hurdles and challenges, and I commit to continuing my engagement with you and your administration, along with my colleagues in the South Carolina delegation and other federal officials, to ensure that our state receives the resources that it needs. Our seniors, as well as vulnerable and underserved populations across the state, merit significant attention as you work to effectively deploy the financial support and tests allocated to South Carolina.

Sincerely,



Tim Scott
United States Senator

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