



Welcome to the spring edition of the AMA's *Very Influential Physician (VIP) Insider*. Read on for details about the topics:

- What the \$2 trillion coronavirus relief plan means for doctors
- HHS announces first round of physician disbursements under CARES Act
- As Congress eyes next round of coronavirus relief – health care providers must be protected
- Recorded webinar: How Congress is interacting with constituents during the coronavirus outbreak

What the \$2 trillion coronavirus relief plan means for doctors

What's the news: The AMA and other physician organizations sought congressional help to the tune of \$100 billion to aid practices financially battered by the global pandemic that has upended American life. The \$2 trillion COVID relief bill was signed into law by President Trump and contains numerous provisions to mitigate the economic damage that the deadly respiratory illness has inflicted on American doctors, hospitals and other health care organizations.

Of particular interest to doctors and their practices, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) includes:

- \$100 billion in direct financial support to hospitals, physician practices, and other health care providers under the [Public Health and Social Services Emergency Fund](#). This support is for the costs of treating COVID-19 patients as well as to ease the financial impact on those who lose revenue due to reductions in other services as a result of the pandemic. The first \$30 billion of this fund was distributed on April 10, with payments made direct deposit to eligible providers. These payments do not need to be repaid.
- A new loan product within the Small Business Administration for loans of up to \$10 million to help cover payroll and overhead costs, with expanded loan-forgiveness criteria. Physician practices with not more than 500 employees may qualify.
- Suspension of the 2% Medicare sequester in May, to run through December 2020.
- Limitations on liability for volunteer health care professionals during COVID-19 emergency response.
- A temporary waiver of the face-to-face visit requirement with home dialysis patients.
- Authority for the Health and Human Services (HHS) secretary to waive telehealth coverage requirements for new patients during a national emergency. Previous legislation provided flexibility only for established patients seen within the past three years.
- Enhanced use of telehealth under Medicare for federally qualified health centers.
- The CARES Act also includes a provision carrying the "health extenders" package through to Nov. 30, 2022. That package was initially set to expire May 22.

Why it's important: The \$100 billion in direct financial support, and many of the other helpful provisions included in the legislation, [were among those sought by the AMA](#) and many other physician organizations along with the American Hospital Association and the American Nurses Association.

In a [letter to congressional leaders](#), the AMA and other physician organizations explained that the CARES Act should “support and sustain physicians and their practices during this unprecedented national emergency.”

AMA President Patrice A. Harris, MD, MA, commented on the CARES Act while it was under negotiations.

“At this critical moment, physician practices need significant financial support to sustain themselves and continue meet the health care needs of all Americans during this time,” Dr. Harris said.

Surge-capacity measures taken to [cancel or postpone elective procedures](#) have taken a financial toll on doctors and hospitals, some of which are being overwhelmed by an influx of patients needing inpatient supportive care for COVID-19.

Meanwhile, social-distancing measures mean that many nonurgent outpatient visits have been postponed. While many doctors’ offices have quickly moved to implement telemedicine to provide care while keeping patients safe at home, that uptick is not nearly enough to make up for dramatic losses of revenue that threaten physician practice survival.

Learn more: As more detail about the massive CARES Act and its provisions emerge, the AMA will give doctors information they need to take advantage of the relief it provides. Read a [full summary](#) on what the CARES Act means to physicians and medical students.

HHS announces first round of physician disbursements under CARES Act

Since last Friday when HHS [announced](#) it would begin disbursing the first \$30 million of the emergency fund created under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to physicians and other providers via direct payment, the AMA has received several questions about how to verify eligibility for payment and who to contact when a physician believes they are eligible but did not receive a payment. HHS partnered with UnitedHealth Group (UHG) to deliver the stimulus payments, and physicians should contact UHG’s Provider Relations at 866-569-3535 about eligibility, whether a payment has been issued, and where it was sent. Note, if a physician or practice did not already set up direct deposit through CMS or UHG’s Optum Pay, they will receive a check at a later date. Practices that would like to set up direct deposit now can call the UHG Provider Relations number.

In addition, HHS has opened the [CARES Act Provider Relief Fund Payment Attestation Portal](#). Physicians who have been allocated a payment from the initial \$30 billion general distribution must sign an attestation confirming receipt of the funds and agree to the terms and conditions within 30 days of payment. The terms and conditions are listed [here](#).

As Congress eyes next round of coronavirus relief – health care providers must be protected

Recently, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic gripping the nation, Congress took action by passing the “Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES Act).” This legislation was a [meaningful step](#) in preserving the health care infrastructure in this time of crisis by providing immediate financial support for hospital physicians and other health care clinicians.

Unfortunately, it is now clear that it is simply not enough to address this unprecedented pandemic. Congress will be discussing an additional round of relief legislation when it is scheduled to return to Washington early in May.

As Congress considers next steps for a “phase four” coronavirus relief bill package to confront this emergency of extraordinary—and yet, unknown—proportions, the physician community is strongly urging Congress to take

additional steps to protect patient access to care by preserving the viability of physician practices as part of the nation's essential health care system.

Any additional coronavirus relief package should:

- Continue the expansion of and add flexibility for Medicare accelerated and advanced payments to give physicians greater ability to deal with the current crisis
- Better address Medicare and Medicaid payment policy to account for the lack of positive updates to further assist America's doctors caring for patients during the pandemic
- Include direct financial support to help sustain physician practices through the COVID-19 crisis and additional funding for the small business loans recently authorized by the Small Business Administration
- Continue support for the expansion of telehealth by requiring ERISA group health plans to provide the same telehealth services being covered by Medicare
- Increase support for resident physicians and students through federal loan forgiveness and tuition relief
- Institute broader liability protection for physicians and clinicians as they continue their front-line fight against COVID-19

Read the AMA's [joint letter](#) with state medical and specialty societies sent to Congressional leadership.

The CARES Act was an essential first step in the COVID-19 fight but as the pandemic grows it is clear that more needs to be done for America's patients and those that are on the front lines taking care of them.

[Please contact your member of Congress and Senators today](#) and tell them that any additional COVID-19 relief legislation should include the physician and patient protections outlined above.

Recorded webinar: How Congress is interacting with constituents during the coronavirus outbreak

Recently, our partners at the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) hosted a webinar titled "How Congress is Interacting with Constituents During the Coronavirus Outbreak."

[Click here](#) to access the recorded webinar

Included in the webinar was an insightful interview with a Congressional staffer: Congresswoman Donna Shalala District Director & Deputy Chief of Staff, Raul Martinez, Jr. He provided his perspective and advice on how advocacy groups should engage during this public health crisis.

Fresh CMF Research on Congress During COVID-19: While other groups may have recently invited you to attend webinars on virtual fly-in events, CMF's is the only one based on a survey of congressional staff conducted since the Coronavirus compelled Congress to perform nearly all its work remotely.

The program explored the following questions:

- What are the best ways for constituents to conduct virtual meetings and communicate with the congressional offices?
- Should advocates limit their efforts just to issues that are related to COVID-19?
- What should advocacy groups think about when deciding whether to conduct a virtual fly-in event?
- How can advocacy organizations get the best-possible return on their virtual fly-in investment?

The webinar was conducted by Bradford Fitch, President and CEO of CMF, and Seth Turner, Director of Citizen Engagement and is an exclusive perk for VIP members.

[Click here](#) to access the recorded webinar.

