

January 7, 2022

Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden:

On behalf of more than 500,000 physicians our organizations represent, we write to thank you for the action taken in response to the latest surge in COVID-19 cases and urge additional action. Our members have been serving on the frontlines of the pandemic for nearly two years, often at great personal risk and sacrifice. They are exhausted and are again facing an unprecedented surge in COVID-19 cases. Despite an overwhelmed health care system and a consistent lack of adequate support for frontline health care workers, they continue to step up, serve their communities, and save lives. Nonetheless, it is past time for federal, state, and local leaders to hear our organizations' and our members' calls for bold action to truly support frontline clinicians by prioritizing their mental health and overall wellbeing, as well as committing to a long-term multilayered public health response to contain COVID-19 and bolster our overwhelmed health care system.

As a first step, the administration should continue to deploy a multilayered strategy that emphasizes the role of vaccination, testing, masking, and physical distancing. This strategy should be coupled with more consistent and ongoing investment in improvements to the vaccines and treatments for the disease, as well as continued public messaging campaigns to provide education on how each layer of defense protects families from COVID-19 and ultimately will help end the pandemic. The physicians we represent are deeply concerned with the rapid spread of the omicron variant and how it has quickly overwhelmed testing and contact tracing capabilities and strained hospital and primary care capacity in many communities. We appreciate the administration's recent announcements that it will augment hospital, laboratory, and pharmacy personnel, as well as distribute personal protective equipment and ventilators from the national stockpile. These actions will help our health care and public health systems respond to a dramatic surge in cases; however, the administration should also monitor how the growing prevalence of more "mild" COVID-19 variants is impacting primary care clinics. Still, additional measures are needed to more effectively stem the rise in cases and prevent future surges. These measures include:

- Ensuring every family can consistently access the most accurate testing options and high-quality masks;
- Increasing vaccination rates;
- Ensuring ongoing vaccine and treatment updates;
- Providing clear, consistent, and proactive public health messaging; and
- Addressing the needs and well-being of our health care workers on the frontlines of this pandemic.

We support the administration's efforts to increase access to and uptake of COVID-19 vaccines and boosters, including via robust community engagement and considering the role of vaccine requirements in keeping patients and vulnerable populations safe. Our organizations know that vaccination remains

our most effective tool for combatting COVID-19, but it is clear that we must commit to a multifaceted approach in the face of the omicron and future variants. A strategy that combines vaccination with the effective use of testing and masking is even more urgently needed to protect children and adults who cannot be vaccinated, immunocompromised individuals, and others who are at a higher risk for severe disease. Additionally, it is critical to ensure that the current vaccines are updated as the virus continues to evolve and that our most at-risk populations, including pregnant people and those with underlying medical conditions, are included in the development of the vaccines. We encourage the administration to proactively plan for any future booster doses that may be needed to ensure that the public is fully protected and made aware of the need for these additional doses, as well as when and why they may be needed. We also appreciate the continued engagement with our organizations as key partners and stakeholders as vaccine recommendations evolve.

In addition to updating the vaccine formulations, clinical treatments for those infected with COVID-19 need ongoing investment to ensure that they continue to be effective as more variants appear. The administration must also prioritize the safe inclusion of pregnant and lactating individuals in the development of these treatments, and address the significant disparities across the country in the availability and accessibility of these treatments for patients that need them.

Our organizations are pleased the administration is taking several steps to increase access to and quality of both rapid and polymerase chain reaction (PCR) COVID-19 tests. Improving point-of-care testing capacity and making free home tests available to families upon request are both important first steps to containing the spread of COVID-19. However, these efforts must be augmented by continually improved and more accurate tests, as well as ensuring there are enough tests made available in a consistent and accessible manner to all. Additionally, it is critically important that these efforts be combined with clear public health guidance and a robust messaging campaign to educate the public on the value of self-testing, as well as when and how they should be used after a potential exposure or before gathering with people in other households.

Similarly, the administration should invest in an approach that provides consistent, equitable access to face masks that are proven to provide the best protection to families across the country and redouble efforts to distribute these at no cost in low-income communities. Federal action is also needed to bolster the supply of high-quality masks and to significantly reduce the price of these masks in stores. Evidence clearly indicates that higher quality masks are more effective at preventing the transmission of COVID-19 than cloth masks, but these masks are currently unaffordable and hard to find. Absent immediate action, our organizations fear the lack of access to masks will worsen the already disparate impact of COVID-19. In addition to making high-quality masks widely available, we urge you to encourage masking in crowded and indoor public places and work with states and other stakeholders to enhance the understanding of why masking efforts are important.

Our organizations recognize that recommendations regarding how to handle exposure to or infection by this virus change as the evidence evolves. While we appreciate the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) sharing the data and rationale behind the recently revised isolation and quarantine guidelines, we strongly urge the need to follow the science, based on the best available evidence, when making decisions that are best for the American public's health in order to combat distrust in public health, help physicians counsel their patients, support our physician members, and enable employers and other stakeholders to accurately adhere to new guidance. To avoid confusion and bolster trust in

our public health agencies, the CDC should publish this type of explanation and supporting data alongside any major changes in public health guidance.

Thank you again for your ongoing partnership and commitment to an equitable, evidence-based pandemic response. We are grateful for your leadership and ongoing efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19 and ensure the health of our nation.

We look forward to continuing to partner with the White House COVID-19 Response Team and the entire Biden-Harris administration. Should you have any questions, please contact Stephanie Quinn, Senior Vice President, Advocacy, Practice Advancement, and Policy at the American Academy of Family Physicians, at squinn@afp.org or 202-510-0538.

Sincerely,

American Academy of Family Physicians
American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
American College of Physicians
American Psychiatric Association
American Osteopathic Association

Cc: Jeffrey Zients, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator
Xavier Becerra, Secretary, Department of Health and Human Services
Dr. Janet Woodcock, Acting Commissioner, Food and Drug Administration
Dr. Rochelle Walensky, Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Chiquita Brooks-LaSure, Administrator, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services
Dawn O'Connell, Assistant Secretary of Preparedness and Response
Douglas Parker, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health