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April 21, 2020

The Honorable Collin Peterson
Chairman
House Agriculture Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington D.C., 20515

The Honorable Nita Lowey
Chairwoman
House Appropriations Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington D.C., 20515

The Honorable Frank Pallone
Chairman
House Energy and Commerce Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington D.C. 20515

The Honorable Richard Neal
Chairman
House Ways and Means Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington D.C. 20515

The Honorable Nydia Velázquez
Chairwoman
House Small Business Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Peterson, Chairwoman Lowey, Chairman Pallone, Chairman Neal, and Chairwoman Velázquez,

Americans across this country need more assistance as the COVID-19 outbreak has now surpassed a month. 22 million Americans have filed for unemployment, our small businesses remain closed, and our health care workers are working overtime without adequate protections. It is clear that another COVID-19 stimulus package is needed immediately.

Since the outbreak began, I have been working closely with Iowans to ensure that our state is able to care for all of our citizens. I write to you with deep concern that, if nothing changes, our rural communities will face overwhelming financial and economic insecurity. We must ensure that Congress invests in our rural communities. During my conversations with rural residents, mayors, and rural businesses, I have found areas that are in dire need of assistance and must be addressed in the next stimulus bill.

As congressional leaders and the White House negotiate much-needed additional funds for the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), we must ensure that all businesses have equal access to securing that assistance. After speaking with rural businesses and financial institutions, I am worried that an unfair and unequal amount of the \$350 billion for PPP went to larger and more urban locations. Small businesses are the lifeblood of our rural communities. As such, we must also require that no less than 20% of new PPP funding is targeted directly for rural areas.

During this public health emergency, we must do more to support our health care partners who are on the front lines of protecting the health of our nation. In conversations with rural hospitals and clinics across my district, they have shared frightening information with me. Due to the increased costs associated with COVID-19, rural hospitals and health clinics are facing financial insolvency. Rural hospitals that I've spoken with are at risk of closing their facilities within the next 30 days if we do not provide financial assistance.

That is why I am calling for our next stimulus package to include: 1) increasing direct assistance to hospitals across this country; 2) no-interest loans to hospitals and clinics; 3) eligibility for small rural health clinics and rural hospitals in the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP); 4) creating a COVID-19 hospital debt-forgiveness program; and, 5) allowing for immediate and emergency conversions of any rural health care clinic into a Critical Access Hospital. We cannot allow any health care provider who is serving our communities to close their doors during this pandemic, and we must provide them with the assurance that financial assistance is coming.

Our rural health care workers are also in need of our support. Small, public hospitals do not qualify for PPP and are in dire risk of having to lay off staff. We must immediately pass legislation to clarify that PPP applies to our rural hospitals, which will ensure funding for rural health care facilities. This will give our rural health care sector the financial security it needs to remain open during this outbreak, and in turn ensure our health care workers continue to serve their communities.

We must also focus on getting personal protective equipment (PPE) into states like Iowa. I know that the best way to thank and support our health care workers is to protect them at work – and pay them for their service. That's why I'm calling for hazard pay for our hospital and health care workers during this time. I've heard from nurses, health care administrative staff, doctors, and more who have had to rent an apartment to keep their family safe, or have had their spouse leave their job to take over caring for their children. Health care staff across this country must be financially compensated for the dangerous and extreme working conditions there are currently facing.

I remain concerned that COVID-19 "hotspots" have become the focus for getting supplies and testing. In order to stay ahead of this outbreak, we need to ensure that Iowa and other states have adequate PPE supplies and test kits. We cannot find ourselves in a situation where we are "chasing" the outbreak from hotspot to hotspot, and instead focus on prevention and stopping this spread. I want to ensure equitable access to COVID-19 testing for states like Iowa as well as ensure access to COVID-19 antibody testing once it becomes available. Despite the Administration's claims, there is not enough testing across this country. Not everyone in Iowa, or across the country, is able to get a test. The Administration proposed, but later withdrew, the idea of creating "red zones" and "green zones" where tests and other essential medical supplies would be allocated to states in red zones at the expense of states in the green zones. COVID-19 doesn't abide by state lines. The best way to protect our citizens is to ensure all states are prepared. This upcoming package should include language to ensure Iowa is able to access testing and supplies on an equitable level to any other state.

One of the best investments we can make to support rural Americans is supporting investments into fast broadband internet access across the entire country, especially in our rural areas that lack connectivity. This pandemic has demonstrated that affordable high-speed internet access should be accessible to every American in order to do schoolwork, run their business, receive online medical care, stay connected with family, or find assistance. We must also work to remove data caps and service limitations during this pandemic. That is why any COVID-19 stimulus package must include expanding internet access now and investing in a nationwide broadband structure for the future.

Supporting our rural communities also must include our agriculture sector, which I implore the House to not forget or overlook during this crisis. Without our farmers and producers, our nation would come to a stop. We need to ensure that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) continues to have the resources and flexibility to provide relief to our small, family farmers and take all necessary steps to ensure that our farmers are able to produce and market this year. That is why we need to include and expand support for our agriculture sector, first by ensuring the Farm Service Agency (FSA) continues to provide flexibility, including extending application deadlines, loan payment deferrals, payment forbearance, and suspending all current and pending foreclosures within the agriculture sector throughout this crisis. We should require that the USDA use Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) funding to provide direct relief to biofuels facilities, which employ hundreds of Iowans whose jobs are at risk during this economic slowdown and serve as a local market for a significant amount of our corn and soybean farmers.

While I appreciate the good work we accomplished in the CARES Act, we must reform the provision relating to aid to smaller governments and rural communities. The CARES Act determined only local governments above 500,000 people would receive direct support. If left unchanged, not a single city or county in Iowa would qualify. While I was supportive of the CARES Act, it was immediately clear we would have to revise this section. That is why we should create a grant program funded with \$250 billion for state and local governments to make up for lost revenue. I have attached a legislative proposal about how we can get funding to even our smallest governments and do so without unnecessary delays.

Our rural communities need our support in these difficult times. I am ready to work with you to ensure that important funding for rural areas is provided quickly and effectively.

Sincerely,



Cindy Axne
Member of Congress