June 26, 2020

The Honorable Lamar Alexander, Chairman
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander:

On behalf of the Cancer Support Community, an international nonprofit organization that provides support, education, and hope to cancer patients, survivors, and their loved ones, we encourage you to expand the paid family and medical leave program created in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act to protect Americans who are most vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic. This policy will ensure that individuals determined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to be at high risk for adverse complications from COVID-19 and working members of their households can remain home for the duration of this crisis.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has advised those at high risk for severe illness from COVID-19 to continue to shelter in-place to protect their health during our current pandemic. However, under existing emergency paid leave policies legislated in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, workers are only eligible for up to two weeks of financial support and job protection through expanded paid sick leave. Additionally, the legislated paid family medical leave program only provides support to those with children or adults with disabilities whose local school district or usual care providers are closed due to the pandemic for up to 10 weeks. These policies do not capture the many Americans impacted by cancer who worry about their health or the health of their household. The lack of coverage for individuals who live with significant health conditions such as cancer leaves them facing a devastating choice: place their health or their loved one’s health at risk by going back to work or lose their job and likely their health insurance. This is unacceptable during the COVID-19 pandemic and will be unacceptable during future pandemics.

At this time of great uncertainty in our country, it is important to understand that certain individuals are at much higher risk of adverse health events and death associated with COVID-19 than the rest of the population. Although recent research indicates the overall fatality rate from COVID-19 is around two percent, individuals with certain health conditions like cancer experience a greater rate of severe complications and have higher fatality rates from COVID-19. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University have found that patients with cancer have a 5.6 percent fatality rate and those with cardiovascular disease have a 10.5 percent fatality rate (Auwaerter, 2020).

These very startling statistics demonstrate why individuals with serious health conditions and other risk factors, as identified by the CDC, and working members of their household should receive job protection and financial support through paid family leave. As you develop policy proposals for the next pandemic and continue to work on responding to COVID-19, the cancer community encourages you to make the following changes to the paid family and medical leave program created in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act:
• Expand eligibility for paid family leave to include anyone who, because of a serious health condition that places them at grave risk from COVID-19, has been advised by their physician to remain home
• Expand eligibility for paid family leave or additional financial support to include anyone who has been advised by a physician to remain home because there is a member of their household who has a serious health condition that places them at grave risk from COVID-19
• Remove the arbitrary time limit on paid leave to ensure that these individuals can remain home as long as the COVID-19 pandemic poses a risk to their health and wellbeing
• Ensure this program applies to employers of all sizes

For many people with cancer and their circles of support, the COVID-19 pandemic is magnifying existing financial and logistical burdens associated with their care. In this time of extreme uncertainty, we urge Congress to act swiftly to enact these changes to protect the health and wellbeing of those Americans most at risk. We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments and please reach out to me at efranklin@cancersupportcommunity.org if you would like to discuss any of the above in more detail.

Respectfully Submitted,

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References:
