COVID-19 Is Putting Cancer Patients and Survivors in Greater Need of Affordable Health Care and Safety Net Services

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to test the nation’s public health, economic, and safety net capabilities in new and significant ways. The fault lines in our nation’s health care and safety net systems have never been so exposed and there is an urgent need to significantly invest and protect individuals, particularly those with chronic health conditions like cancer. The rapid and continuing spread of COVID-19, coupled with rising unemployment and an estimated 5.4 million individuals who have lost health insurance coverage, demands that the White House and Congress comprehensively and thoughtfully address health coverage and affordability gaps.

As Congress and the Executive Branch address health care challenges and in particular, negotiate the details of the next stimulus package, the Cancer Support Community (CSC) urges policymakers to fully consider what patients need right now and not be distracted by policy proposals that fall short of that. When policies are proposed or enacted—whether the goal is to rein in prices, enhance quality, or address access—they must focus on whether patients have ample health care coverage, can afford the resources and services they need, and can access innovation.

While many policy decisions are being made at a rapid pace in order to address the economic fallout and the associated health care challenges, CSC is resolute that patients must remain at the forefront of these discussions in the following ways:

- Policy changes should be considered in a broad context which places patients at the center, including policies that expand coverage and make drugs more affordable. It is vital to understand the implications that each policy change will have on the health care system and in the lives of individual patients.
- Policy changes should honor patient shared decision making.
- Efforts to reduce health care spending should address affordability and stability in the overall health care system as well as in the lives of individual patients.
- Policy changes should be transparent to all stakeholders.
- Policy changes should improve patient access to appropriate therapies.
- Policy changes should improve affordability for patients.
- Policy changes should be accompanied by information to help patients understand the potential impact to them.
- Patients should be given ample opportunity and time to understand policy changes, ask questions, and seek assistance necessary to maintain access to care.

CSC has advocated for a host of critical, lifesaving health care and economic protections including:

- Opportunities for individuals to seek private and public health insurance coverage that provides ample health care benefits;
- Enhanced access to vital medications and health care services at affordable prices;
- Access to permanent telehealth and tele-mental health services;
• Protection of patients with chronic illnesses, including cancer, from discriminatory triage plans in response to the pandemic;
• Access to appropriate and affordable medications (such as oral therapies) and options to receive health care services in the most appropriate and preferred settings (such as home infusion/injection) in order to safeguard health and wellbeing;
• Banning of surprise medical billing;
• Expansion of health care networks to ensure convenient and safe access to care;
• Lifting of utilization management techniques (such as step therapy) that prevent access to timely care and services.
• Expanded (in both time period and amount) unemployment insurance to ensure that individuals who are unemployed, underemployed, or unable to work due to a compromised immune system have access to enhanced benefits;
• Enhancements to paid family and medical leave for people living with chronic illnesses including cancer and their caregivers living in the same home;
• Protections for children and families at school and work; and
• Enhanced funding for nonprofit organizations providing vital safety net services.