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March 2, 2020

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
S-128, the Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nita Lowey
Chairwoman
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
H-307, the Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
437 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kay Granger
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
1026 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Shelby, Chairwoman Lowey, Ranking Members Leahy and Granger:

AARP, on behalf of our millions of members and all older Americans nationwide, strongly urges Congress to immediately enact legislation providing ample resources needed to combat deadly coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). In addition, we must ensure that any vaccine or treatment for this virus be affordable and accessible to all.

Older Americans may be particularly vulnerable to the coronavirus, including those living in long-term care settings. In this country, the first fatalities due to the virus are Americans over the age of 50. In China, data from China's National Health Commission shows that the majority of people who have died from the disease in that country are over age 50. Likewise, a study in the New England Journal of Medicine, which analyzed the first 425 people with the virus, found that the median age of patients was 59.

As this country and the world looks to contain the spread of COVID-19, federal investments in diagnostics, treatment, vaccine development, outreach and education, and timely and consistent public health efforts are imperative. Robust support and resources must be provided to states and localities, including health care professionals and first responders, who are on the front lines of this effort. Specifically, investments that support rapid diagnosis in state public health laboratories, additional staffing to investigate, identify and treat new cases, necessary protective gear and transportation for

those in need of medical evaluation must be a priority. Furthermore, public health messages need to be culturally competent and language appropriate to reach the maximum number of individuals.

We also know that telehealth can play an instrumental role in containing and treating diseases during an emergency. In order to maximize emergency responsiveness, we request that you remove restrictions preventing Medicare coverage for telehealth services. Greater availability of telehealth services would increase access to health providers, including specialists, facilitate the sharing of clinical information for evaluation, and improve remote patient monitoring, particularly during times of public health emergencies. Such technology would help bring care to the patient, rather than having the patient travel and put others at risk for possible exposure.

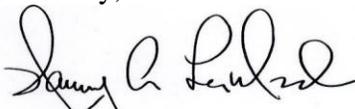
Again, it is critical that any vaccine or treatment be affordable and accessible to all Americans. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) plays a vital role in the funding, research, and development of drugs, including vaccines. Millions in taxpayer dollars will be used to help protect and treat people in the face of this virus. Accordingly, AARP supports providing NIH with the funding needed to sponsor the development of treatments that protect Americans against this coronavirus. Any vaccine, especially one developed with taxpayer dollars, must be priced in a way that ensures broad access. Vaccinations are only effective if all those who need it can afford to access it. We also urge all efforts be made to protect against and address any drug or medical device shortages that result from impacts to the medical supply chain.

The current epidemic is yet another example of why Congress must enact comprehensive prescription drug reform this year. There is nothing in the system that protects Americans from the possibility that drug companies will engage in price-gouging behavior, even during a public health crisis. Americans pay among the highest drug prices in the world, yet we remain powerless to the greed of drug companies. Congress has before it legislation that would lower drug prices and out-of-pocket costs. The time to enact comprehensive prescription drug reform is now. We cannot afford to wait any longer.

AARP also believes that as part of its robust response, Congress and the Administration should restore all funding transferred from other national and global health programs and other FY 2020 funding across the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Without such replacement, said reprioritization of funds would likely compromise multinational efforts to respond to Ebola and other emerging infectious disease threats as well as diminish other health and health-related economic assistance such as vital energy assistance aid to vulnerable older Americans.

AARP greatly appreciates your attention to our concerns regarding the COVID-19 outbreak. Should you have questions or concerns regarding our request, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Nancy LeaMond
Executive Vice President
Chief Advocacy and Engagement Officer