

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

March 4, 2020

Secretary Alex M. Azar II
U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services
200 Independence Ave.
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar,

I write today to follow up on concerns I raised with you last week at the Ways & Means Committee hearing on the Trump Administration's proposed fiscal year 2021 budget about coronavirus (COVID-19) preparedness at rural hospitals in Wisconsin and across the country. Some rural hospitals may not have the supplies and resources necessary in case of a COVID-19 outbreak in their community. Rural hospitals often operate on low margins and the potential increased costs associated with treating patients with COVID-19 could affect their ability to serve their communities. I encourage the Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) to develop a plan to ensure rural hospitals have the resources they need and rural providers are protected in case of additional cases of COVID-19 in rural areas.

Hospitals and providers in rural areas are preparing for potential cases of COVID-19 in their communities. Unfortunately, reports have indicated that some hospitals are facing a shortage of medical supplies.¹ Medical supplies often reach rural hospitals last due to their distance from suppliers and the relative size of facilities compared to rural areas. Not only does this put our frontline rural health care providers at risk, but it threatens to limit access to routine services for patients. We must ensure that any plan to increase the supply of medical goods adequately addresses the needs of rural facilities.

Additionally, we must ensure that rural hospitals have access to timely diagnostics testing capabilities for COVID-19. As of last week, test kits provided to the Wisconsin State Laboratory of Hygiene by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) were not functioning properly, causing unnecessary delays in testing for COVID-19. I understand that Wisconsin now has the capability to conduct COVID-19 testing locally, but I urge HHS to consider the needs of rural hospitals when working to further expand testing capabilities.²

Rural hospitals face unique challenges and many operate on low margins. Over the last ten years, 124 rural hospitals have closed across the country, including 19 hospitals in 2019. One in five rural hospitals are considered at risk of closure and 47% face negative operating margins. These circumstances make it difficult to prepare for a potential influx of patients. HHS should consider providing additional resources to rural hospitals in order to ensure these facilities have the resources they need.

Once again, I urge HHS to ensure that rural facilities have the resources they need to prepare for the potential impact of COVID-19 in their communities. I appreciate your attention to this important matter, and I request a response to this letter as soon as possible.

Sincerely,



Ron Kind
Member of Congress

1. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/bracing-for-coronavirus-cash-strapped-rural-hospitals-buy-masks-from-hardware-stores/2020/02/29/a2f16330-5988-11ea-ab68-101ecfec2532_story.html

2. <https://www.wpr.org/testing-coronavirus-be-done-madison-milwaukee>