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October 27, 2021

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Becerra-

I write today to emphasize the important role independent, community-based pharmacies play in our nation's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and to urge the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to take steps to increase the ability of independent pharmacies to participate in the HHS pharmacy program to provide free COVID-19 testing.

The demand for free, rapidly accessible COVID-19 testing will continue as long as the threat posed by the pandemic to our everyday lives refuses to abate. This issue has added emphasis in Western New York, as Canada is requiring all travelers to show proof of a negative COVID-19 test for entry. The busiest travel season of the year is almost here, and as a result more Americans are likely to seek testing than ever before and after they travel during the holidays. These tests can be expensive, and few people can afford to regularly spend hundreds of dollars each and every time they wish to cross the border.

On October 6, White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator Jeff Zients announced that the Biden Administration plans to significantly expand Americans' access to COVID-19 testing, both at home and at the pharmacy. This included expanding the number of pharmacies participating in the HHS free testing program by 20,000. It is vital that independent, community-based pharmacies be included in this expansion in order to meet the White House's goal to "ensure that every American, no matter their income level or ZIP code, can access accurate, convenient, and affordable testing."¹

Independent pharmacies play a key role as trusted providers in the communities they serve. But during the COVID-19 pandemic, independent pharmacies have faced barriers to participating in the kinds of partnerships HHS has cultivated with large national pharmacy chains to provide free COVID-19 testing at their locations. If independent pharmacies wish to offer free COVID-19

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/10/06/press-briefing-by-white-house-covid-19-response-team-and-public-health-officials-60/>

testing to their patients via the HHS pharmacy program, their only option is to subcontract with eTrueNorth, a HHS testing contractor. This has limited the ability of independent pharmacies to have their testing costs covered by HHS, and independent pharmacies often lack the financial resources to offer free testing absent HHS's assistance. This places independent pharmacies at a distinct disadvantage and reduces the options for free testing in their communities.

There are additional opportunities to increase independent pharmacy participation in the HHS program. For example, thousands of independent pharmacies participate in Community Pharmacy Enhanced Services Networks (CPESN) that enable independent pharmacies to offer additional services to patients. HHS has already recognized the value these networks play in getting care to patients, naming CPESN USA as a Federal Pharmacy Partner for the CDC COVID-19 Vaccination Program.² I urge HHS to consider how they might further leverage the opportunities provided by independent pharmacies to expand access to free COVID-19 testing in our communities.

Thank you for your attention to this issue, and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Brian Higgins". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Brian Higgins
Member of Congress

² <https://cpesn.com/media/1430/cpesn-pr-cdc-vaccination-partner-111220203.pdf>