



FUTURE OF
PHARMACY CARE
COALITION

October 5, 2023

The Honorable Jason Smith

U.S. House of Representatives
Chair, Committee on Ways and Means
1139 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE: Request for Information: Improving Access to Health care in Rural and Underserved Areas

Dear Chairman Smith and Members of the House Committee on Ways and Means:

The Future of Pharmacy Care Coalition (FPCC) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the House Committee on Ways and Means' request for information (RFI) entitled Improving Access to Health Care in Rural and Underserved Areas. FPCC comprises of American healthcare companies and professional associations that together provide care for hundreds of millions of patients and represent pharmacists and community pharmacies of all sizes across the U.S. Our Coalition commends the House Committee on Ways and Means for its commitment to addressing health care access barriers in rural America and to seek input on solutions to address health disparities in rural and underserved areas. **As the committee considers solutions to ensure rural Americans have adequate access to health care services, our Coalition urges you to support and advance the *Equitable Community Access to Pharmacist Services Act (H.R. 1770)* in the 118th Congress.** This bipartisan legislation will allow Medicare beneficiaries to access prompt and essential pharmacist services, including testing, vaccines, and treatments for common respiratory conditions, all of which are essential to protect seniors' health and well-being.

As the most accessible healthcare providers in the nation, pharmacists play a vital role in bridging access gaps and ensuring millions of Americans – particularly those in rural and underserved areas – can routinely access essential care and services. Pharmacists hold a pivotal role in safeguarding the health of seniors and other vulnerable populations. In rural regions, where 20% of the U.S. population resides but only 10% of physicians practice, patients rely heavily on local pharmacists to meet their healthcare needs.

Medicare patients in rural areas have an average of [14 pharmacy visits](#) per year compared to only 5 primary care encounters, underscoring the pivotal role pharmacists play in bridging access gaps and delivering essential vaccines, treatment, and other routine services to seniors. With their expertise and accessibility, pharmacists ensure that seniors and vulnerable individuals can receive prompt care, vital information, and the necessary preventive measures to mitigate the impact of prevalent diseases. The presence of pharmacists in rural communities not only bridges healthcare access gaps but ensures that patients can build trust with a health care provider and feel comfortable seeking the care they need.

Despite the urgent need for accessible health care, pharmacists continue to operate under a fragile foundation of temporary scope of practice and reimbursement authorities that were established in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the end of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (PHE) in May 2023 and uncertainty whether pharmacists will continued be covered under the liability protections of the *Public Readiness and Emergency Preparedness (PREP) Act*, seniors may lose access to essential pharmacist services they have come to rely on in their communities. If Congress does not act with



urgency to ensure coverage of pharmacist-provided testing, vaccination, and treatment initiation under Medicare, seniors may be left without access to these essential services while those with private insurance, Medicaid, and the uninsured see no interruption in access.

The *Equitable Community Access to Pharmacist Services Act* (H.R. 1770) is bipartisan legislation that will ensure seniors maintain access to prompt pharmacist services. H.R. 1770 would create Medicare Part B direct reimbursement for essential pharmacist services, including testing (for COVID-19, flu, RSV, and strep throat), treatment (for COVID-19, flu, strep throat, and RSV), and vaccination (for COVID-19, flu, pneumococcal disease, and hepatitis B). Additionally, while seniors will benefit from the expanded access to care from H.R. 1770, the passage of this bill could stem the tide of pharmacy closures by providing an additional source of revenue for these essential providers. As noted in the letter to stakeholders announcing this RFI, “independent community pharmacies have decreased in number by more than 16 percent in the last 20 years,” but we believe that H.R. 1770 has the potential to ensure that more independent pharmacies stay open so they can continue to serve their communities, especially those in rural areas.

We commend Representatives Adrian Smith (R-NE) and Brad Schneider (D-IL) for their leadership on this legislation and are proud that nearly 80 other Members of Congress across the parties have cosponsored H.R. 1770. More than 190 organizations, including rural and senior advocacy groups, physician and provider groups, patient advocacy organizations, pharmacists, health systems, and many others also support the legislation.

Preserving patient access to pharmacist services is among the most important issues Congress must address to improve our nation’s health care system. We urge the House Committee on Ways and Means and the entire U.S. House of Representatives to act swiftly to enact H.R. 1770 before the end of the year to ensure continued access to essential health care services in rural and underserved areas.

In the face of provider shortages, access challenges, and capacity issues in the health care system, pharmacists provide a safe haven for rural Americans. Congress must ensure seniors have access to prompt pharmacist services to safeguard their health against present and emerging public health threats.

Thank you for your leadership and commitment to patients.

Sincerely,

The Future of Pharmacy Care Coalition