

United States Senate

March 20, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar
Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20201

The Honorable Pete T. Gaynor
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
500 C Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20024

Dear Secretary Azar and Administrator Gaynor:

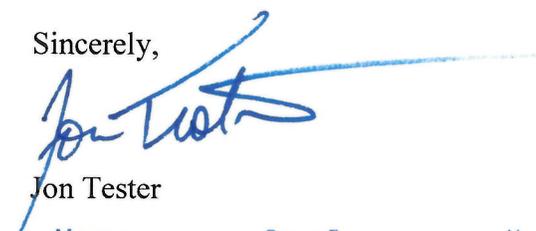
I write today to urge you to ensure rural states like Montana have access to test kits, relevant supplies, personal protective equipment (PPE), and ventilators. I have spoken with leading health care officials across the state and they all have expressed a need for these basic resources as our brave health care workforce steps up to the front line to combat COVID-19.

Rural America faces unique challenges in responding to COVID-19. Compounding the challenges of distance from major hospital centers, provider shortages, and remote communities, rural Americans tend to be older and less healthy, making them high-risk for the harshest impacts of the disease. Rural emergency medical services (EMS), ambulance companies, and first responders, also lack the resources to invest in PPE despite the blatant risk to these critical providers. Unfortunately, the health centers and ambulance services in these communities are resource-strapped and poorly equipped under normal circumstances. Even in the best of times, rural hospitals struggle to balance the books and stay afloat given the extremely low patient volume and increasing move toward home health. A recent study by the Chartis Center for Rural Health said that one in four rural hospitals was at risk of closure. Given these facts, it is no surprise that rural providers lack resources to fill in supply shortages in good times, much less in crisis.

As the nation's health care system prepares for an influx of patients, the needs of rural providers must be accounted for. As the Department of Defense (DoD) carries out a strategic lift of 500,000 diagnostic swab kits for COVID-19, five million N-95 respirator masks, and 2,000 ventilators, I implore you to consider the shortages that already plague rural America. I would also request that you deploy urgently needed National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) personnel to affected rural areas, since rural communities have the most abject health workforce shortages. While the "hot spots" of COVID-19 may not have yet reached rural America, the impact of COVID-19 may be more catastrophic in these remote communities if they are not readily equipped to face the incoming challenges.

I stand ready to work with you to address this situation.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester