

COMMITTEES:

APPROPRIATIONS
BANKING
COMMERCE
INDIAN AFFAIRS
VETERANS' AFFAIRS

United States Senate

March 19, 2020

Senator Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Chuck Schumer
Democratic Leader
United States Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader McConnell and Leader Schumer:

As negotiations proceed on the Congressional response to the ongoing pandemic, I write to request additional supports for our nation's community health centers (CHCs). CHCs across the country and in Montana are on the frontlines of responding to this crisis, including via telehealth services to patients across Montana's rural and frontier communities. I write to urge both swift action on long-term funding for CHCs by reauthorizing the Community Health Center Fund (CHCF) before the funding cliff on May 22 and attention to an oversight in H.R. 6074, the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2020.

In Montana, community health centers play a critical role in serving patients across the state, particularly for families in rural and frontier communities. A majority of Montana counties are designated as primary care shortage areas, so the 65 community health center delivery sites across my home state are vital to maintaining the wellbeing of our communities especially in the face of the coronavirus.

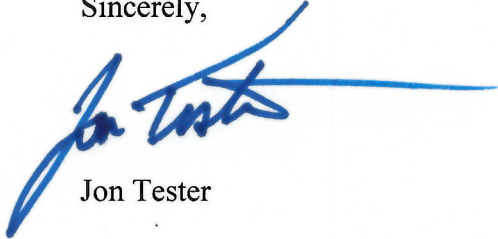
Just as our health centers are critically important to our states, the CHCF is essential to maintaining the services that community health centers provide. Established in 2011, CHCF funds a range of health center activities and services, ranging from hiring new staff and making capital improvements to behavioral health integration, substance use disorder treatment, and telehealth technology. At a time when health care capacity is central to the nation's wellbeing, I request swift action to guarantee funding for our CHCs past the May 22nd funding cliff.

In addition to reinforcing the urgency of providing long-term funding for CHCs, the first Congressional response to the pandemic, H.R. 6074, incorporated part of the CONNECT for Health Act to allow the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to waive certain telehealth restrictions during the current public health emergency and allow patients to receive telehealth services in their homes. While an important step, the statutory changes do not address an existing barrier in Medicare for CHCs to be eligible for "distant" site telehealth providers. Under current law, CHCs can only act as the originating site for telehealth delivered services, and geographic and site limitations still apply. That means that some of the satellite clinics in the most remote areas of my state, like Chinook, Troy, Seeley, and Colstrip, cannot take advantage of these telehealth flexibilities. The lack of alternative providers in these

communities compounded by the urgency of the current situation necessitates this oversight be addressed in any subsequent legislative proposals.

I appreciate your swift attention to this urgent matter and look forward to addressing these critical concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon Tester", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jon Tester