

United States Senate

April 14, 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:

I write today with serious concerns about the viability of our rural hospitals. As you are well aware, rural America faces unique challenges in responding to COVID-19. We must equip them with all the resources we have at our disposal. As such, I write to urgently request that you clarify that publicly-owned hospitals and rural health clinics are eligible entities for the Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program (PPP).

Montana's hospitals were operating on thin margins before this health care crisis. A recent study by the Chartis Center for Rural Health said that one in four rural hospitals was at risk of closure. It is no surprise that rural providers lack resources to fill in funding shortages in good times, much less in crisis. Furthermore, in preparation for treating COVID-19 patients, hospitals have canceled or significantly cut back on elective procedures, sharply cutting their revenue streams. While demands for care and costs steadily increase, the dollars coming in the door have dropped abruptly.

Making sure that these small, county-owned facilities have the means to continue operating is critical. Across Montana, four hospitals in our most remote communities are county-owned: Garfield County Health Center in Jordan; Granite County Medical Center in Philipsburg; Marias Medical Center in Shelby; and Missouri River Medical Center in Fort Benton. Marias Medical Center in Shelby is already at the center of the pandemic in Montana, with more than two dozen confirmed cases of COVID-19 tied to a patient in the assisted living facility adjacent to the hospital. Granite County Medical Center in Philipsburg is another example of municipal-owned center of care. Without the care at Philipsburg's small hospital, the next closest hospital is more than 75 miles away. These small hospitals and providers are the lifeblood of their communities – employers, providers, and a resource in times of crisis. Without them, residents of these frontier and remote towns will have nowhere to turn.

Allowing these small hospitals to be eligible for the loans through the PPP will provide them a lifeline in this time of national emergency. I appreciate your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jon Tester". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jon Tester