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LPCA Statement on Congressional CHC Funding Extension & COVID-19 Response

As the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continues to impact communities across our country, we are heartened to see Congress come together in record time to provide Americans with relief. Last week, Congress passed a bipartisan measure that will provide \$2 trillion in assistance to a variety of stakeholders, including corporations, industries, small business, state and local governments, and many more. Most Americans will also be eligible to receive modest cash payments – a small, but welcome bit of relief during this stressful time.

Fortunately, our nation's Community Health Centers were also included in this package. Congress allocated \$1.32 billion, aimed at assisting health centers in their response to the pandemic. The legislation also provided for extended mandatory funding for health centers, the National Health Service Corps, and the Teaching Health Center Graduate Medical Education Program. Regrettably, this funding only extends through November when, yet again, health centers will have to summon lawmakers to act before the deadline.

While this is certainly a step in the right direction, this amount of emergency funding is woefully inadequate as health centers respond to the COVID-19 pandemic – especially for health centers in Louisiana.

Louisiana and the Greater New Orleans Region are being hit particularly hard by the deadly spread of the coronavirus. With over 5,000 positive cases and over 230 deaths reported, Louisiana is experiencing one of the highest per capita case counts in the United States.

As expected, Louisiana's 39 Community Health Center organizations have risen to the challenge and continue to go above and beyond in meeting the needs of their patients. Many are quite literally serving on the frontlines by conducting COVID-19 testing on-site. All health centers are supporting the work of Louisiana's overrun hospitals by addressing the rising demand for care, assessing patient symptoms, and helping in conducting triage. Health centers, already known for their efficiency and innovation, have quickly redesigned clinical protocols, rearranged their facilities, and are engaging in telehealth services to care for their patients while keeping them safe from exposure.

This, of course, comes with a steep financial cost. Louisiana's Community Health Centers are being stretched thin. With the spread of the virus, they are experiencing a steady decline in patient visits and revenues. Public schools have been shuttered, so school-based health centers have been forced to close. Health centers have cancelled or postponed routine dental visits, vision services, and enabling programs. Like other healthcare providers across the country, health centers are dangerously low on supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE). Some of our members have been forced to close after learning that employees may have been exposed to COVID-19. All have been forced to make tough decisions on staffing and some may be forced to lay off employees.

In a recent report released by Capital Link, a Boston-based consulting firm, Louisiana's Community Health Centers are on track to lose at least \$29 million in revenue. Over 800 jobs are at stake – plus nearly double that amount in job losses when considering the indirect impact this crisis is having on their communities at large.

Make no mistake about it: Louisiana's Community Health Centers face an existential crisis.

We are grateful for the support we have received from our Louisiana Congressional delegation. The funding already authorized will be of great benefit in the short term. However, as this ever-growing crisis continues to cripple our state, Louisiana's Community Health Centers will need much more in the coming weeks and months to operate at the highest level.

Over and over again, we have insisted that Community Health Centers deserve long-term, sustainable funding. Now, with the COVID-19 crisis upon us, we cannot think of a more dire reason to fully support the work of our members. Our health center professionals continue to serve patients all across our state, often risking their own health and safety. No matter what comes next, health centers will uphold their commitment to their patients. In return, we need Congress to uphold its commitment to health centers.

About the Louisiana Primary Care Association

The Louisiana Primary Care Association (LPCA) represents 39 federally funded, private, non-profit and public Community Health Centers (and 3 Look-Alikes) across Louisiana that serve over 444,000 patients annually. LPCA promotes community-based health services through advocacy, education, and collaboration with community partners. Our goal is to ensure that every Louisianan has access to affordable, quality, primary care services. For more information, visit www.LPCA.net.