



February 8, 2021

Dear Senator,

On behalf of Nemours Children’s Health System, I am writing to thank you for your leadership and efforts to address the COVID-19 pandemic as well as advance children’s health policy. In addition to my gratitude, I write to request your consideration of additional legislative opportunities to improve the health and well-being of our nation’s children in the next COVID-19 package.

As you know, Nemours is an internationally recognized children's health system that owns and operates the Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children in Wilmington, Del., and Nemours Children's Hospital in Orlando, Fla., along with over 80 other care facilities across five states. Nemours delivers pediatric primary, specialty, and urgent care to children from all 50 states. In addition to clinical care, we provide research, education, advocacy, and prevention programs to benefit children everywhere. Nemours also powers the world’s most-visited website for information on the health of children and teens, KidsHealth.org. We are striving to create the healthiest generations of children.

As the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress takes up the difficult task of leading a national recovery effort, we urge you to consider immediate priorities to mitigate the ongoing COVID-19 crisis as well as broader policies to address child poverty and health system transformation, both of which are increasingly important and critical areas as we consider long-term pandemic recovery. Together, these interconnected domains will help to sustain and strengthen the safety net for children and their families, and ensure our health care system remains ready to serve them when necessary.

**Immediate Needs**

We believe the most pressing health-related priorities in the next COVID-19 package are: a robust and equitable public health strategy for COVID-19 testing and vaccination; identifying and addressing the social, emotional and mental health impacts of the pandemic; continued relief for health care providers and Medicaid programs; and funding to support ongoing research.

Public Health: A robust testing and vaccination strategy is needed to address safe school and child care reopening for children as well as safe return-to-work supports for parents. More work should be done to ensure children receive routine vaccinations, are included in COVID-19 vaccine trials and are vaccinated safely. We know that children and families of color are more likely to contract and suffer severe illness related to COVID-19. We recommend support for researching and addressing these racial and ethnic disparities in order to provide greater opportunity for all children and families to have equitable access to social, economic and health recovery. One existing opportunity to advance this priority is the Community Immunity During COVID-19 Pandemic Act, which would provide funding to state and local public health departments to develop, scale and evaluate local initiatives to boost vaccination rates during the COVID-19 pandemic. We urge inclusion of this bill in the next COVID-19 package.

Nemours Children’s Health System

Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children

Nemours BrightStart!

Nemours CareConnect

Nemours Center for Children’s Health Media

Nemours Children’s Clinic

Nemours Children’s Hospital

Nemours Children’s Primary Care

Nemours Children’s Specialty Care

Nemours Children’s Urgent Care

Nemours duPont Pediatrics

Nemours Estate

Nemours Fund for Children’s Health

Nemours Health & Prevention Services

Nemours Office of Policy and Prevention

Nemours SeniorCare

Mental and Behavioral Health: While children remain isolated at home or return to school and child care, we must be aware of the socioemotional toll the pandemic has had. Trauma informed care, parental supports and other evidence-based approaches should be integrated in school and child care reopening strategies. Providers who care for children in schools, child care and the primary care setting should be appropriately trained to address the evolving needs of children and families. We ask Congress to include funding to support these priorities in the next legislative package.

Health Care: Health care providers are critical partners in protecting the health and wellness of our children. Providers have been on the front lines of the pandemic through testing, treatment and vaccination. We also play a critical role in addressing health disparities as well as preventing and treating mental health challenges. Recognizing this critical role and the detrimental impact the pandemic has had on health care organizations, Congress has provided support through the Provider Relief Fund. Yet, children's hospitals across the country are facing significant challenges. Unlike adult hospitals, children's hospitals have not seen high volumes of COVID-19 patients. In addition COVID-19 precautions like stay at home orders, reductions in non-emergent care, social distancing measures and lingering hesitancy to seek routine or emergent care have all contributed to significantly lower patient volumes. Children's hospitals across the country are consistently experiencing volume deficits of 10-18% or higher, causing significant revenue losses that will impact their operations in the near and long term. Additional relief is needed to support the fiscal health of our nation's children's hospitals. We ask that you consider including additional provider relief funds in the next legislative package.

In addition, Medicaid has served as a critical safety net before and during the pandemic. Medicaid programs across the states have been strained due to the influx of need. Congress, recognizing this challenge, provided an increased federal medical assistance percentage (FMAP) match of 6.2% in the Families First Act. We ask that Congress extend the increased FMAP match through June 2022 and consider another FMAP increase, bringing the total match to 14% in the next legislative package.

Finally, much progress has been made on telehealth in the form of temporary flexibilities during the Public Health Emergency. While we support the permanent changes to Medicare policy related to telehealth, most children and families are more directly impacted by changes to Medicaid and commercial coverage. We urge Congress to consider policies that would expand and improve access to telehealth through Medicaid and commercial plans. One such policy is the TREAT Act which would provide temporary authorization for licensed providers to provide care via telehealth across state lines without having to obtain additional licenses.

Research: The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has posed serious challenges to research activities, including shutdowns of research projects to comply with stay-at-home directives and the resulting costs in terms of both resources and time. These challenges are particularly burdensome to early-career researchers who have yet to achieve research independence. We recommend targeted support for early career investigators throughout the duration of the pandemic and beyond.

Child Care and Education: The pandemic has placed immense pressure on schools and educators as they struggle to deliver high quality education to the nation's children and youth

while simultaneously working to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 exposure. We support a unified national strategy that provides emergency funding and technical assistance to schools so they are well-equipped to screen for COVID-19, navigate state and federal requirements, and ultimately remain safely open. We recommend the provision of additional emergency funds to support childcare facilities – many of which are facing significantly reduced enrollment or closures due to financial constraints – so that families who rely on childcare providers are not forced to choose between caring for their children and working to provide income to their families.

Addressing Social Needs: – As more families struggle to meet basic needs during such unprecedented circumstances, it is imperative that additional measures are taken to ensure families are connected with appropriate resources. This includes access to adequate housing and nutrition for populations most impacted by the pandemic, as well as the technical infrastructure necessary to connect families to community resources. These actions are especially vital to ensure that our country's pre-existing social and health inequities are not further exacerbated. We recommend that Congress provide emergency support for safety net programs and funding for infrastructure solutions to address the social determinants of health.

### **Long-term, Sustained Recovery**

More broadly, we ask you to consider larger policy changes to aid in the recovery and rebuilding of our nation.

Family supports to address child poverty: Child poverty is a longstanding challenge with severe long-term consequences. Taking steps to reduce child poverty is now more important than ever. The economic consequences of the pandemic challenge the stability and wellbeing of many American families. Lacking paid sick leave or family leave, many parents must choose between their job and the health of their families. Further, families who already experience poverty now face even more economic hardship. Many have lost jobs, access to child care, and struggle to feed and house their children. We know that poverty contributes to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and toxic stress, which have long-term implications for poor health and socioeconomic outcomes. Policies to extend paid sick leave or paid family leave would help insulate children and families from job loss due to illness. Providing additional relief through an expanded child tax credit would also offer critical financial support to families, during the pandemic and beyond. We recommend inclusion of critical family supports in the next COVID-19 package.

Value-based care models that pay for health: Ultimately, health system transformation that focuses on wellness and value will help our health system recover from this crisis and become stronger through rebuilding our health infrastructure. Health care institutions serve to protect and enhance the health and wellbeing of our population. During the pandemic, health care institutions have been on the frontline fighting COVID-19, but continue to face incredible challenges that impact their ability to care for our nation's sick and vulnerable. Longstanding, systemic challenges have been both highlighted and exacerbated in the face the current crisis. This includes a payment system that incentivizes high-volume, sick-care models tying financial stability to a steady flow of sick patients. As discussed above, COVID-19 has reduced pediatric hospital visits for a variety of reasons, resulting in significant revenue losses. Now more than ever, a pivot toward value-based care models focused on whole-person care, particularly for children, could help protect and enhance the health and wellness of our children and families as well as promote the fiscal health of our hospitals. We urge you to support providers, payers and

states through the provision of Technical Assistance and funding to develop, test and refine pediatric value-based payment models that address social determinants of health, especially at a time when children and families are facing such great social and economic challenges.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Daniella Gratale, Director of the Office of Child Health Policy and Advocacy at 202-425-5805 or [daniella.gratale@nemours.org](mailto:daniella.gratale@nemours.org). Nemours stands ready to partner with you to create the healthiest generations of children.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kara Odom Walker".

Kara Odom Walker, MD, MPH, MSHS  
EVP, Chief Population Health Officer  
Nemours National Office of Policy & Prevention