

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 4, 2020

The Honorable Ralph S. Northam
Governor
The Commonwealth of Virginia
P.O. Box 1475
Richmond, VA 23218

Dear Governor Northam:

As your Administration continues to respond to and prepare Virginia for any potential cases of the coronavirus (COVID-19) in the Commonwealth – we are writing to request that you act to eliminate cost-sharing burdens that could deter individual’s willingness and ability to seek medical care.

As you likely know, healthcare costs in the U.S. have risen significantly in recent years and can often be an unfortunate barrier to Americans seeking needed medical care. A 2017 study found that Americans paid \$1,122 dollars on average in out-of-pocket costs for their medical care – much higher than individuals in other industrialized nations.¹ In addition, a 2018 report found that about 40 percent of Americans reported skipping a recommended medical test or treatment and 44 percent said they did not go to a doctor when they were sick or injured in the last year because of cost.²

We are fortunate that to date there have been no confirmed cases of the coronavirus in Virginia. While public health officials have warned us to expect the virus to spread, we must work to contain the virus as much as possible. In order to limit the spread of this deadly disease, we must ensure that at-risk individuals seek medical care as soon as possible – and that potential cost burdens are not a deterrent to seeking diagnosis and treatment. In Virginia, about 10 percent of residents lack any form of medical insurance. Among the insured, many individuals still face high deductibles and additional out-of-pocket costs that could be a deterrent to seeking medical care in a timely fashion.³

It is uncertain what the entirety of patient costs associated with COVID-19 may be, but we have already seen disturbing reports of patients left with enormous bills after appropriately and responsibly seeking medical care. In Miami, a patient with healthcare insurance returned from China and sought medical treatment for flu-like symptoms, but still received a \$3,270 dollar

¹ Tikkanen, Roosa, and Abrams, Melinda. “U.S. Health Care from a Global Perspective, 2019: Higher Spending, Worse Outcomes?” Commonwealth Fund. January 2020, https://www.commonwealthfund.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/Tikkanen_US_hlt_care_global_perspective_2019_OECD_db_v2.pdf

² Westhealth Institute and NORC Chicago. (2018, March 26) *New Survey Finds Large Number of People Skipping Necessary Medical Care Because of Cost More Americans fear medical bills than they do serious illness* [Press Release] Retrieved from <https://www.westhealth.org/press-release/survey2018/>

³ Skopec, Laura, Shartzter, Adele, and Aarons, Josh. “A Profile of Virginia’s Uninsured, 2018.” The Urban Institute. 28, February 2020, <https://www.vhcf.org/data/profile-of-virginias-uninsured/>

medical bill after his hospitalization.⁴ An American who was evacuated from Wuhan received a \$3,918 in medical bills after he and his 3-year-old daughter were required to spend several days in an isolation unit at a local children's hospital.⁵ If patients fear the financial consequences of seeking appropriate screening, treatment and quarantine, it will severely handicap the government's ability to control the spread of this virus.

We urge your Administration to ensure that – during this outbreak – Virginia residents enrolled in healthcare coverage through Virginia's Department of Medical Assistance Services are not deterred from seeking medical care due to cost-sharing. In addition, we ask that your Administration work with the Virginia State Corporation Commission and private insurers to guarantee that individuals enrolled in private insurance plans are also shielded from cost burdens that could jeopardize our ability to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in Virginia.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of this request and we look forward to working with you and other stakeholders on this important issue moving forward.

Sincerely,



Mark R. Warner
U.S. Senator



Tim Kaine
U.S. Senator

⁴ A Miami man who flew to China worried he might have coronavirus. He may owe thousands. (2020, February 24), *Miami Herald*. Retrieved from <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/health-care/article240476806.html>

⁵ Kept at the Hospital on Coronavirus Fears, Now Facing Large Medical Bills. (2020, February 29), *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/29/upshot/coronavirus-surprise-medical-bills.html>