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July 29, 2020

Dr. Fotinos, Bill, Amber and David:

Attached, please find a letter from Katie Smith Sloan, President/CEO of LeadingAge, our national partner, concerning the recently announced antigen testing “plan” by HHS. Sloan’s letter reflects concerns LeadingAge Washington has also expressed to state leaders and has shared with our national partner.

While we have yet to receive these antigen machines and testing supplies, we caution against relying on these tests for asymptomatic residents and staff given the high rate, 20%, of false negatives. We do agree there is limited value to these antigen tests and should be but one method for identifying COVID cases and implementing appropriate treatment and mitigation protocols. LeadingAge Washington does, however, suggest that when clinically appropriate, in symptomatic individuals, the antigen test is performed. However, in the absence of symptoms or known exposure to COVID of staff or residents, the antigen test should not be used; instead the staff or residents should be tested using PCR tests. This approach conserves the antigen testing supplies to where clinically appropriate and to produce more reliable and valid results. In the absence of symptoms or known exposure, the individual should be tested using PCR. This approach not only conserves the testing supply resources but also staff time in administering multiple tests and the dollars needed to purchase supplies and analyze tests.

This leads me to a concern that Robin Dale and I have repeatedly raised since late June. Washington state has all but eliminated the enhanced COVID dedicated funding that assisted living and skilled nursing facility providers had been receiving prior to July 1st. This action is unconscionable; it sends an uncontested and clarion message to seniors and their health care professionals that their lives are expendable. That somehow it’s acceptable to turn our backs on the most vulnerable by depriving their care providers of the very tools needed to protect their lives and maintain their health and that of the broader communities in which staff live, including their own families. Without adequate funding we can not purchase critically needed supplies or even consider taking on the cost of testing.

In just two months, we will enter typical flu season. Now is the time we should be building our inventories of cleaning supplies and PPE and preparing for what will surely be another wave of COVID and flu that will make March-present day 2020 look like the good old days. As we’ve recently reported, the PPE supply line is dripping for most and dry for those that lack the funding needed to make purchases. Unless the state plans to continually and timely distribute PPE and cleaning supplies to long term care providers from the state’s stockpile, the Governor must immediately increase funding to providers so they may privately build their own infection control inventory.

While we work every day to provide care and protect seniors and our staff, we do so without limited liability protection and we lay bare to civil lawsuits for wrongful death, lost economic wages and other damages. We view the state as our partner in what will either be our success or our failure to rise to the

occasion to defeat our common enemy. And while we can not prevent all COVID related illness or even death, knowingly withholding essential resources, in congregate settings where the most vulnerable live and caregivers work, will come with a greater loss of life and place a heavy burden on the conscience of those who failed to act.

It is our sincere hope that we can and will act responsibly to prepare now to banish this virus from our long term care communities. These are health care systems, much like hospitals. We care for older Washingtonians, those who are no longer able to contribute to the economic engine of our state but who have fought wars and helped build our communities of today. We can and must do better for seniors; let them know they are not expendable, that their lives continue to have purpose and value.

Please increase funding for long term care so we can fight COVID and keep our elderly and their caregivers safe.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Deb Murphy".

Deb Murphy
President/CEO