DATE

The Honorable Alex Azar
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

The Honorable Seema Verma
Administrator
Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
7500 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21244

Re: Considering Social Determinants of Health and Socioeconomic Status as a Contributing Factor to Patient Health and Outcomes in Hospital Star Ratings

Dear Secretary Azar and Administrator Verma:

Thank you for your statement on January 29th highlighting your intent to modifying the methodology for overall hospital star ratings in this fiscal year’s upcoming Inpatient Prospective Payment System rule. Star ratings for hospitals remain the best means that we have to convey quality of care to patients and their families, and we believe that it’s important to have a transparent and accountable star rating system that accurately reflects the outcomes that a hospital delivers. As you consider refinements to the system, we ask that you develop a methodology that takes into account the role of social determinants of health and other socioeconomic factors that may contribute to a patient’s outcomes beyond the immediate scope of care that they receive in the hospital.

Health is not just limited to the care that is provided in a doctor’s office or in an operating room; it can be influenced by the patient’s access to transportation to reach their physician for follow-up appointments and the availability of healthy food options and exercise opportunities in the patient’s community. We believe that these factors are pivotal to having a holistic understanding of a patient’s health and should be considered when evaluating care.

These concepts are not new to the Medicare program. Congress passed the IMPACT Act in 2014 and tasked the Department to study the role that these types of factors play in federal health programs. From this, the Department produced a report on the influence of “social risk factors” in value-based payments and, to our understanding, is in the midst of evaluating additional reports and opportunities to incorporate evaluations of social determinants in federal health programs. Additionally, in 2016, Congress passed the 21st Century Cures Act and updated the Hospital Readmission Reduction Program to include “peer grouping” as a means of considering
how a patient’s socioeconomic status contributes to their potential hospital readmission. These actions have helped further we understand overall health, and we ask that you build upon them by taking social determinants of health and socioeconomic status into account in your upcoming revisions to the star methodology system.

We thank you again for your interest in these necessary reforms, and we hope to continue to work with you to bridge the gap in care and outcomes for patients with differing socioeconomic statuses and improve health for all Americans.

Sincerely,

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Rob Portman                    Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator          United States Senator