

April 12, 2019

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

Re: The Elimination of Viral Hepatitis in the United States

Dear Secretary Azar,

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, we respectfully urge you to create a plan to eliminate hepatitis B and C in the U.S. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that up to 5.3 million people in the United States live with hepatitis B (HBV) or hepatitis C (HCV); over half are unaware that they are living with the disease. The ongoing opioid crisis is driving increased new cases of HBV and HCV, along with HIV. Infectious disease rates will continue to rise without increased investment across our country's public health infrastructure. Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C can both be eliminated, and recent treatment advances provide an unprecedented opportunity to do so. HCV is curable with oral antiviral medication in as few as eight to twelve weeks. There is an effective vaccine for HBV and non-curative treatments that lower the risk of liver cancer and prevent transmission. Of the 1.2 million persons living with HIV in the U.S., 25 percent are coinfecting with HCV and 10 percent are coinfecting with HBV.

The World Health Organization created a global strategy for eliminating hepatitis B and C by 2030. The U.S. signed onto the plan, but achieving its goal requires national commitment and additional resources. A national plan to eliminate hepatitis would provide the strategy and coordination necessary strategy to prevent, treat, cure, and ultimately eliminate hepatitis in the United States. This plan should coincide with President Trump's recently announced *Ending the HIV Epidemic* plan, which represents an ambitious goal with meaningful investment and strategic implementation to reduce new HIV infections. We encourage the President and Congress to develop a similarly bold initiative for viral hepatitis. People living with HIV are disproportionately affected by viral hepatitis and because of this, ensuring that the two diseases are addressed concurrently will lead to greater success.

In 2016, 41,000 new cases of HCV occurred in the U.S. New HCV infections have increased 3.5-fold from 2010 to 2016, as has the risk for mother-to-child transmission of the disease. Available data suggest that up to 70 percent of new HCV infections are among people who inject drugs, amplifying the devastation of our nation's opioid crisis. HCV kills more people than the other 60 nationally-notifiable conditions combined. It is the deadliest infectious disease in America. Up to 2.2 million people in the U.S. are living with HBV, with 70 percent of those unaware that they are living with the disease. In states such as Maine, heavily impacted by the opioid crisis, there has been a 729 percent increase in acute hepatitis B cases from 2015-2017, with 55% of patients requiring hospitalization.

As rates of new infection rise, we must remember that the tools to eliminate viral hepatitis, including among people living with HIV, exist. Elimination will require a significant investment; increased, dedicated resources for viral hepatitis; and continued access to health care services and treatment for those living with and at risk for viral hepatitis and HIV. The Administration's leadership on this public health issue and opportunity is essential if we are to achieve the realistic goal of ending viral hepatitis in our lifetime. The below organizations thank you for your continued work in combating the spread of infectious diseases within the setting of the opioid epidemic.

We welcome the opportunity to work with you and your staff. Should any questions arise or if you need additional information, feel free to reach out to Garrett Eberhardt, Manager of Policy and Legislative Affairs at NASTAD, by email at geberhardt@nastad.org, or by telephone at (202) 897-0112, ext. 2008.

Sincerely,

AIDS United
Alliance for Patient Access
Asian Pacific Health Foundation
Bronx Lebanon Hospital Family Medicine
Caring Ambassadors Program, Inc.
End AIDS Now
Global Liver Institute
Hawaii Health & Harm Reduction Center
Hep Free Hawaii
NASTAD (National Alliance of State & Territorial AIDS Directors)
National Viral Hepatitis Roundtable (NVHR)
Robert G. Gish Consultants LLC
The AIDS Institute
The Hepatitis C Mentor and Support Group, Inc. (HMSG)
Treatment Action Group

cc: ADM Brett P. Giroir, M.D., Assistant Secretary for Health, HHS Office of the Secretary
Tammy R. Beckham, DVM, PhD, Director, Office of Infectious Disease and HIV/AIDS Policy (OIDP)