

# Rhode Island Chapter

INCORPORATED IN RHODE ISLAND

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN®



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Elizabeth Lange, MD, FAAP  
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Kristin Lombardi, MD, FAAP

Dear Congressman \_\_\_\_\_,

I am reaching out on the behalf of Rhode Island pediatricians as we work to keep our practices viable during these uncertain financial times. We understand that we are one of many industries impacted by social distancing, but I am afraid that this situation may be a breaking point for an already vulnerable field, and could have negative effects on the medical care of children in Rhode Island for many years beyond the current pandemic.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic began, our membership expressed a concern that Medicaid payments were inadequate to meet the needs of their patients. A 2019 survey of our members showed that 78% felt that current levels of Medicaid payment adversely affected their ability to care for their patients, 97% felt that increased rates would allow them to improve care, and 57% of practices had either dropped or were considering dropping Medicaid plans. Based on this information, the Rhode Island Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, along with the Rhode Island Primary Care Physicians Corporation, have been working with the RI legislature to gain Medicare parity for Medicaid payments in Rhode Island.

Another area of concern uncovered in our survey was in the area of pediatric workforce. In 2019, 61% percent of pediatricians reported that they were within 10 years of retirement, with 66% of practices finding difficulties recruiting younger doctors to replace those aging out. The primary reason noted for poor recruitment is lack of adequate payment from insurers, particularly Medicaid, to cover the expenses of their practices. Sixty six percent of pediatricians noted a decrease in take home pay in 2019, with 32 percent reporting stable wages, and only 2% reporting a pay increase. This has created a unique situation where graduating doctors with no experience are demanding salaries greater than that of our most experienced pediatricians.

The dire situation for pediatric practices across Rhode Island has accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the population that we serve has been relatively spared by the disease itself, our efforts to protect our most vulnerable patients and staff in the face of a PPE shortage have left our offices empty. At this point, most practices are seeing only healthy children under the age of two for

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critical vaccines and a smattering of sick visits each day. We've been forced to lay off staff and stop taking salaries as we transition our practices to telemedicine and wait until it's safe to open our doors fully again.

Many Rhode Island pediatricians are hoping to take advantage of Paycheck Protection Program loans to keep our doors open, although several have applied and been rejected due to lack of available funds. We anticipate that this could be one source of funding that will allow us to retain our employees once this crisis abates, provided that the program is refunded. Unfortunately, these loans alone will not be enough to sustain us, particularly if social distancing lasts for an extended period. While the Provider Relief Fund has provided \$30 million to health care providers, it has been directed to those receiving Medicare funds, which does not apply to the field of pediatrics.

As Congress discusses the disbursement of the remaining funds from the CARES act and subsequent relief efforts, we ask that you advocate for us in the following ways:

1. Ensure that a portion of the remaining \$70 million dollars from the Provider Relief Fund is earmarked for pediatric primary care outside of the dollars dedicated to Federally Qualified Health Centers (in RI, 50% of Medicaid patients are cared for in offices that are not FQHCs)
2. Support efforts, including Covid-19 Phase 4 legislation, to renew funding for the Payroll Protection Program
3. Support federally guaranteed Medicaid retainer payments as a bridge to support practices with a large percentage of our most vulnerable patients
4. Support national efforts for Medicare parity of Medicaid payments such as the Kids' Access to Primary Care Act of 2020

Thank you again for your ongoing efforts and support as we tackle this pandemic together. I'm hopeful that some forward thinking now will not only get us through this horrible time, but will put Rhode Island pediatricians in a better position to care for our children for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Gregory Fox, MD, FAAP

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