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November 20, 2024

The Honorable Mike Johnson
Speaker
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker Johnson, Majority Leader Schumer, Minority Leader Jeffries, and Minority Leader McConnell,

On behalf of The Society of Thoracic Surgeons (STS), I am reaching out to emphasize our critical priorities as we approach the end of the legislative session. Founded in 1964, STS is a not-for-profit organization representing more than 7,800 surgeons, researchers, and allied healthcare professionals worldwide who are dedicated to ensuring the best possible outcomes for surgeries of the heart, lungs, and esophagus, as well as other surgical procedures within the chest.

We encourage Congress to include the following measures, each of which have received substantial consideration during this session, in any year-end package to enhance healthcare delivery and access to care for patients.

Medicare Physician Payment Relief

As you are likely aware, physicians are receiving annual cuts to Medicare reimbursement, with a 2.8% reduction slated to start January 1, 2025. This will coincide with an expected 3.6% increase in medical practice cost inflation. The American Medical Association (AMA) reports that since 2001, Medicare physician payments have fallen by nearly 30% when adjusted for inflation. The impending cuts to Medicare physician payments threaten the ability of thoracic surgeons and other healthcare providers to deliver high-quality care. These cuts not only jeopardize patients' access to vital services but also strain our healthcare system. This is recognized by the 233 bipartisan members in the House that signed a [letter to leadership](#) requesting legislation to stop the cuts.

We strongly urge Congress to mitigate these cuts and provide a partial inflation adjustment in any year-end package by enacting H.R. 10073, the Medicare Patient Access and Practice Stabilization Act.

Next year, Congress should take swift action on long-term reforms consistent with what has been proposed in H.R. 2474, the Strengthening Medicare for Patients and Providers Act, and H.R. 6371, the Provider Reimbursement Stability Act of 2023.

Retain Telehealth Flexibilities

Access to telehealth has become one of the essential mechanisms with which patients can receive care. Currently, many essential Medicare telehealth flexibilities are set to expire on December 31, 2024. The COVID-19 public health emergency (PHE) illustrated how valuable a tool telehealth can be for all communities, including those that are in rural or underserved communities. We believe that the goal should be to permanently expand telehealth flexibilities to ensure that all communities, including rural and underserved areas, will not lose access to critical services. If that goal is not possible to achieve by the end of this Congress, we believe a two-year extension is necessary.

Enact the Accelerating Kids Access to Care Act

STS urges the Senate to pass S. 2372, the Accelerating Kids' Access to Care Act, which passed the House of Representatives by a unanimous voice vote. This bill would reduce barriers to families and children receiving lifesaving out-of-state care. Specifically, it would establish a voluntary pathway for qualified providers providing specialized care to children that are not available locally to enroll in other states' Medicaid or CHIP programs without burdensome or delayed screenings. Congenital and pediatric cardiothoracic surgeons treat children who live with complex medical needs such as congenital heart disease. Families of these children often struggle to access and coordinate specialized care and must travel out-of-state to seek necessary lifesaving treatment. The process for these families can be onerous, redundant, and cause significant delays in time-sensitive care. For these reasons, we need policies that ensure timely access to care for children and families with complex medical conditions.

Strongly Fund Critical Medical Research

Congress should ensure robust funding for several pivotal healthcare programs and institutes including:

- National Institutes of Health (NIH) which is crucial for advancing medical research, including innovative treatments and surgical techniques. Continued investment in NIH research not only propels scientific discovery but also translates to better patient outcomes.
- National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI) which would allow the NIH to maintain progress on mission-critical research addressing cardiovascular, respiratory, blood, and sleep-related disorders. Unfortunately, despite research advances, these conditions continue to be among the leading causes of death and disability in the United States.
- National Cancer Institute (NCI) which leads the national effort to eliminate suffering and death caused by cancer and supports research, training, and dissemination of information on cancer prevention, diagnosis, and treatment.
- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) at the Senate Appropriations Committee-approved level of \$376 million. AHRQ supports research to improve healthcare quality, reduce costs, advance patient safety, decrease medical errors, and broaden access to essential services.
- Lung Cancer Program within the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Programs (CDMRP) at a minimum level of \$25 million. This program invests in research on biomarkers of disease

recurrence, cutting edge immunotherapies, targeted tests, and treatments with added emphasis on under-researched small cell lung cancer.

We appreciate your prioritization of these issues and look forward to working with you. Please contact Molly Peltzman, Associate Director of Health Policy, at mpeltzman@sts.org or Derek Brandt, Vice President of Government Affairs, at dbrandt@sts.org, should you need additional information or clarification.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jennifer C. Romano". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Jennifer C. Romano, MD, MS
President