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June 25, 2020

The Honorable Andrew Saul
Commissioner
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21235

Dear Commissioner Saul:

We write to urge the Social Security Administration (SSA) to request the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) to advise the agency on the long-term health effects of COVID-19, the effectiveness and availability of treatments, and how to best evaluate the long-term impact of the virus on survivors' ability to work.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, doctors are warning that some patients will experience long-term medical problems – from physical impairments to cognitive dysfunction to mental illness – even after they recover from coronavirus infection. SSA should closely monitor the evolving research and understand how gaps in access to treatment and other disparities influence outcomes. For example, rates of death and severe illness due to COVID-19 are alarmingly high among people of color, who may also disproportionately experience related long-term health problems. Moreover, approximately two-thirds of Social Security disability beneficiaries have multiple impairments.

It is vital that SSA understands the long-term health effects of COVID-19 including for people of color and survivors with pre-existing medical conditions or multiple diagnoses. To qualify for Social Security or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) disability benefits, individuals must have severe and long-lasting medical impairments that substantially limit their ability to support themselves through work. While a diagnosis of COVID-19 will not by itself make an individual eligible for Social Security or SSI disability benefits, SSA can expect to see increasing numbers of children and adults who have survived COVID-19 but are experiencing long-lasting health effects.

Medical research on COVID-19 is evolving rapidly. Already, the existing base of scientific knowledge points to many potential long-term consequences, due both to the clinical impact of

the coronavirus itself as well as to the enduring effects of treatment and health inequities. For example, one study found that even five years after acute respiratory distress syndrome – a common complication of COVID-19 – many patients have persistent physical and neuropsychological impairments.¹ In addition, research abounds on the long-lasting negative health effects of intensive care unit (ICU) stays, needed by some COVID-19 patients.² Delirium, a common illness for ICU patients, also leads to prolonged difficulty in achieving activities of daily living years later.³ These types of long-term medical impairments are all too common and have diverse effects on health and disability.

SSA has for many years used NASEM to convene medical experts to review this type of foundational and emerging scientific research. Engaging with NASEM will help SSA to better understand the effects of COVID-19 and how to update its disability adjudication process and criteria accordingly.

Social Security and SSI are particularly important for people with pre-existing health conditions, people of color, and many older workers who are more likely than ever to lack savings or private insurance to fall back on if they acquire a severe, life-changing disability. We hope you will agree that now is the time for SSA to begin preparing to properly evaluate the long-term effects of COVID-19 on the health and ability to work of individuals who may apply for Social Security and SSI disability benefits. We urge SSA to work with NASEM in support of this goal.

Sincerely,



John B. Larson
Chairman
Subcommittee on Social Security
Committee on Ways and Means



Danny K. Davis
Chairman
Subcommittee on Worker and Family Support
Committee on Ways and Means

¹ <https://www.nejm.org/doi/pdf/10.1056/NEJMoa1011802>

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19363570?dopt=Abstract>

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3947028/>