

September 14, 2021

Mr. Ronald A. Klain  
Chief of Staff  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Ambassador Susan Rice  
Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy  
Eisenhower Executive Office Building  
1650 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20502

Mr. Cedric Richmond  
Senior Advisor and Director of the Office of Public Engagement  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. Klain, Ambassador Rice, and Director Richmond:

We write to you today in your capacity as the leaders of the Administration-wide effort to advance racial equity so boldly established in President Biden's January 20, 2021 [Executive Order](#). Consistent with the goals of that order, we urge you to take action now on a critical health equity crisis: the growing number of Black and Latino people living with obesity who lack access to comprehensive care for this chronic disease.

The obesity epidemic is one of the **most serious health equity issues** impacting our country, affecting [42 percent of Americans](#). As a top comorbidity for serious cases of COVID-19 and death, obesity disproportionately impacts Black and Latino communities, who are nearly three times as likely to be hospitalized for severe cases of COVID-19 than whites. Obesity is also linked to more than 200 serious health conditions including diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, and strokes.

Even though obesity is an epidemic that can lead to additional serious health issues, Black and Latino communities can't access the health care needed to treat the disease. That's because of **outdated Medicare rules that perpetuate harmful inequities** and deny lifesaving care to millions of seniors.

Today, obesity medications are part of a short list of excluded drug categories in Medicare, including hair loss drugs, erectile dysfunction medication, and cold and flu treatments. When Congress passed Part D, these categories were meant to exclude cosmetic or traditionally over-the-counter treatments. Yet obesity care has life or death implications, and is a disease with a

disproportionate impact on minority communities. Medicare also places undue restrictions on intensive behavioral therapy, only allowing primary care providers to deliver this service and not obesity medicine specialists, registered dietitians, psychologists, or evidence-based community-based programs, and severely restricting the physical locations in which this care can occur.

Despite a growing number of treatment options and shifts in healthcare toward recognizing and treating obesity -- notably a 2013 decision by the American Medical Association formally recognizing obesity as a disease -- Medicare Part D has remained unchanged. This leaves millions of seniors, particularly members of Black and Latino communities, vulnerable to costly chronic illnesses and premature death due to lack of treatment. **As a result of these restrictions on obesity medication and intensive behavioral therapy, less than one percent of seniors on Medicare have access to obesity care.**

We applaud this Administration's commitment to tackling systemic racial inequity, particularly as our nation continues to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. **That's why we urge you to take action to provide obesity care now, especially as the rising Delta variant once again threatens some of our most vulnerable populations.**

Providing access to the full continuum of care for obesity could make a meaningful difference in the fight against COVID-19, and result in significant savings to our health system. Obesity is associated with nearly \$1,900 in excess annual medical costs per person (amounting to over \$170 billion in excess medical costs per year), with the highest costs occurring for adults 60-70. Better access to a range of effective treatment not only could save money but also save lives. Reducing the U.S. obesity rate by 25% would have resulted in 120,000 fewer hospitalizations, 45,000 fewer ICU admissions, and 65,000 deaths. Nearly half of those reductions would be among Black people and nearly one quarter would be among Latino people, even though those communities account for 13.4 percent and 18.5 percent of the population, respectively.

We recognize the extraordinary work that lies ahead and believe an important first step is to ensure that our laws and regulations reflect the latest guidelines and standards of care. To that end, we call on the Biden Administration to take immediate action by changing outdated Medicare rules, providing access to lifesaving obesity medication and intensive behavioral therapy now for the many seniors living with obesity.

Sincerely,

National Organizations

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

AIDS Institute

American Academy of PAs

American Council on Exercise

American Gastroenterological Association

American Psychological Association

American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery

Association of American Cancer Institutes  
Association of Black Cardiologists  
Association of Diabetes Care & Education Specialists  
Black Women's Health Imperative  
Center for Patient Advocacy Leaders  
Common Threads  
Diabetes Leadership Council  
Diabetes Patient Advocacy Coalition  
Endocrine Society  
Global Liver Institute  
Healthcare Leadership Council  
Healthy Women  
League of United Latin American Citizens  
MedTech Coalition for Metabolic Health  
National Black Leadership Commission on Health, Inc.  
National Black Nurses Association  
National Consumers League  
National Hispanic Medical Association  
National Kidney Foundation  
National Urban League  
Obesity Action Coalition  
Obesity Medicine Association  
Preventive Cardiovascular Nurses Association  
Public Health Institute  
Redstone Global Center for Prevention and Wellness  
The Gerontological Society of America  
The Obesity Society  
WW (formerly Weight Watchers)  
YMCA of the USA

#### State/Local Organizations

Alabama Dietetic Association  
Alabama State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Arizona State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Arkansas Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
CA Community Action Partnership Association  
California Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
California Health Collaborative  
California Podiatric Medical Association  
California State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Chronic Care Collaborative  
Colorado Academy of Nutrition & Dietetics  
Colorado Medical Society  
Colorado State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery

Community Cardiovascular Initiative  
Connecticut State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Connecticut Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Dakota Yellowstone Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery (ID, MT, ND, SD, WY)  
Delaware Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Delaware State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Florida Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Florida, Puerto Rico, and Caribbean State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Gaining Health  
Georgia State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Illinois Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Illinois State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Indiana State Chapter of American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Iowa Academy of Nutrition & Dietetics  
Kansas Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Kansas State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Kentucky Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Kentucky/Ohio State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Looms for Lupus  
Louisiana State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Maryland Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Massachusetts Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Massachusetts State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Medical Society of New Jersey  
Michigan Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Michigan Department of Education  
Michigan State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Minnesota State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Mississippi Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Missouri State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Montana Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Nebraska Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Nebraska State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
New Jersey Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
New Jersey Association of Hearing Health Professionals  
New Jersey Coalition of Community Hospitals  
New Jersey State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
New Jersey YMCA State Alliance  
New York State Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
New York State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
North Dakota Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
North/South Carolina State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery

Ohio Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Oklahoma Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Oklahoma/Arkansas State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Oregon Alliance of YMCAs  
Oregon State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Pennsylvania State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
South Carolina Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
South Dakota Academy of Nutrition & Dietetics  
Street Soccer USA Philadelphia  
Tennessee Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Tennessee State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Texas Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Texas Association for Bariatric Surgery  
Texas State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Ultimate Bariatrics  
VIC Valley InterCommunity Council  
Washington State Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Washington State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery  
Wisconsin Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics  
Wisconsin State Chapter of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery

CC:

The Honorable Chiquita Brooks-LaSure  
Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services  
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Secretary Xavier Becerra  
Department of Health and Human Services  
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Chair, COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force  
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