

Congress of the United States  
Washington, DC 20515

April 24, 2020

Stephen Hahn, M.D.  
Commissioner of Food and Drugs  
U.S. Food and Drug Administration  
Department of Health and Human Services  
5630 Fishers Lane  
Rockville, MD 20852

Dear Commissioner Hahn:

We are writing to express our serious concern regarding asthma drug shortages in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As detailed in the *New York Times* on April 2, demand has increased sharply for a number of drugs used to treat COVID-19, including albuterol, a drug used to treat respiratory issues.<sup>1</sup> Hospitals have been ordering albuterol inhalers to treat breathing problems in COVID-19 patients because administering albuterol by nebulizers, which are commonly used in hospitals, can disseminate the virus to others.

However, many adults and children with asthma rely on albuterol inhalers as a rescue medication to treat asthma attacks, as do patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. We are concerned that the increased demand for albuterol from hospitals, combined with recommendations that patients seek extended supplies of their prescription medications, are making it harder for people with asthma to access albuterol. Without albuterol, people are more likely to experience asthma attacks that they cannot control, potentially increasing hospitalizations.

We are already hearing from the asthma community about challenges in filling their prescriptions, including for albuterol and other inhalers. These challenges are compounded by those affecting many chronic disease patients in the current epidemic, including fear of exposure to COVID-19 when visiting a pharmacy. One in thirteen individuals in the U.S. – nearly 25 million people – are living with asthma.<sup>2</sup> The CDC has determined that people with moderate or severe asthma may be at higher risk of serious illness due to COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> Preliminary analysis

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<sup>1</sup> Knavul Sheikh, “Essential Drug Supplies for Virus Patients Are Running Low.” *New York Times*, April 2, 2020. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/health/coronavirus-drug-shortages.html>

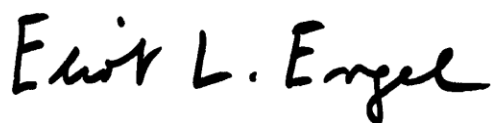
<sup>2</sup> CDC, “Most Recent National Asthma Data” (Updated March 24, 2020). Available at [https://www.cdc.gov/asthma/most\\_recent\\_national\\_asthma\\_data.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/asthma/most_recent_national_asthma_data.htm)

<sup>3</sup> CDC, “People with Moderate to Severe Asthma” (April 2, 2020). Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra->

of U.S. COVID-19 cases with data available on underlying conditions indeed reflects that people with chronic lung disease, including asthma, are among those at higher risk of severe disease.<sup>4</sup> Over 4 million Americans living with asthma are also 65 years old or older,<sup>5</sup> likely rendering them particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 complications and death. It is important that people with asthma have access to their regular medications to keep their symptoms well controlled and optimize their baseline health.<sup>6</sup>

We would like to work with FDA to mitigate the impact of any localized or general shortage on asthma patients. In addition to shortages caused by increased demand, we share the growing concern that the pandemic will affect global supply chains. We of course support the use of albuterol and other important medications to treat patients with COVID-19, but we believe that specific attention to the availability of the drug for existing uses is crucial. Our hope is that state, federal, and private sector efforts to protect access to asthma drugs can be developed before any official shortage is recorded.

Sincerely,



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Eliot L. Engel  
Member of Congress



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Fred Upton  
Member of Congress



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TJ Cox  
Member of Congress



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Peter T. King  
Member of Congress

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[precautions/asthma.html?CDC\\_AA\\_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fspecific-groups%2Fasthma.html](https://www.cdc.gov/asthma/most-recent-national-asthma-data.html)

<sup>4</sup> Preliminary Estimates of the Prevalence of Selected Underlying Health Conditions Among Patients with Coronavirus Disease 2019 — United States, February 12–March 28, 2020. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2020;69:382–386. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6913e2>

<sup>5</sup> CDC, “Most Recent National Asthma Data” (Updated March 24, 2020). Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/asthma/most-recent-national-asthma-data.htm>

<sup>6</sup> American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, “COVID-19 and Asthma: What Patients Need to Know” (March 23, 2020). Available at <https://www.aaaai.org/conditions-and-treatments/library/asthma-library/covid-asthma>.

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