April 7, 2020

The Hon. Alex Azar  
Secretary  
Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue S.W.  
Washington, DC 20201

RE: Ensuring Critical Access to Domestic and International Bone Marrow Transport

We are writing because we need your help to ensure the on-time delivery of absolutely essential, life-saving therapies to those most in need during this unprecedented worldwide crisis. The changing travel environment and other restrictions related to COVID-19 present major logistical challenges for our organizations who represent bone marrow, peripheral blood and cord blood communities throughout the United States. We ask that military support be provided for the transportation of these life-saving products to guarantee the on-time and uninterrupted delivery of this life-saving bone marrow or peripheral blood from donors to patients.

We would like to acknowledge the work that has already been done to ensure the transport of these therapies and thank the Vice President and his Task Force, CDC Director Dr. Robert Redfield, and other Federal agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security, Customs and Border Patrol, and the Department of State, for their quick help in issuing a waiver in the national interest to allow European bone marrow/peripheral blood couriers to transport cellular therapies to American patients.

Those who issued the travel ban waiver have been supportive and it has already proven to be invaluable for the National Marrow Donor Program (NMDP)/Be The Match, which is entrusted to operate the C.W. Bill Young Cell Transplantation Program (Program), a federally authorized and funded program under contract with HHS/HRSA. NMDP works to facilitate the timely delivery of bone marrow, peripheral blood and cord blood for more than 6,600 patients every year who have been diagnosed with leukemia, lymphoma, as well as more than 70 other fatal blood cancers or disorders. In just the two weeks following the extension of the travel ban to the EU, the waiver allowed more than 300 urgent, life-saving transplants to occur uninterrupted.

Trained couriers hand-carry bone marrow and peripheral blood stem cells (PBSC), point to point, in the passenger compartment of scheduled, commercial flights. More than 3,000 of these donated products cross international borders annually. Over the next 30 days, hundreds more products are scheduled to be delivered by couriers both domestically and internationally. Patients awaiting these deliveries are often already in the midst of scheduled courses of
chemotherapy and radiation to ablate their immune systems in preparation for the transplant of donated cells to create a healthy, new immune system. Failure to timely deliver the donated cells to these patients would be catastrophic and, in the vast majority of instances, life ending. There is no aspect of NMDP’s work that is elective or non-essential for our patients.

We understand that you and the members of the Administration are under tremendous strain during these incredibly challenging times. The COVID-19 crisis has forced all of us to rapidly adapt to the changing healthcare landscape. NMDP communicates daily with providers at Transplant Centers throughout its network and knows its Network partners are doing their absolute best to care for patients currently going through the arduous bone marrow transplantation (BMT) process. They are now faced with making very difficult decisions, in collaboration with their patients and families, as to which patients can delay their treatment or for whom alternative therapies can be considered. Other patients, however, have no other course of treatment but a life-saving transplant.

We would ask you and the Administration to continue to partner with NMDP in helping to ensure the on-time delivery of these life-saving therapies to those most in need. Specifically, we believe that it is in the national interest to clarify that cellular therapy products are considered to be essential goods and services for which free circulation within the United States is crucial. In particular, shipments of bone marrow, peripheral blood stem cells, or cord blood for transplantation, as well as blood for transfusion, plasma for transfusion, and plasma for the manufacture of medicinal products, should be considered essential medical supplies.

Currently, domestic and international travel disruptions no longer allow for transport of cellular therapy products through commercial or private means, therefore we ask that military support be provided for the transportation of these life-saving products to guarantee the on-time and uninterrupted delivery of this life-saving bone marrow or peripheral blood from donors to patients. For patients due to receive transplants over the next week, there is no reversing the course of their treatment, so this is truly a life and death situation.

We understand that in order for the Department of Defense (DoD) to engage with the movement of these products, a request must be made by your Department, as the contracting authority for the Program. Time is of the essence in making this request to navigate the hurdles necessary to receive DoD approval for this mission and to begin the planning process for that time in which DoD will need to activate to carry out these life-saving missions.

For more information or to discuss this matter further, please direct your staff to contact Brian Lindberg of the National Marrow Donor Program at blindber@nmdp.org or (612) 978-1401. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

AABB
American Society of Hematology
AdventHealth Cancer Institute
Advocate Lutheran General Hospital
American Society for Transplantation and Cellular Therapy
American Society of Hematology
Center for International Blood and Marrow Transplant Research
Doernbecher Children's Hospital
Froedtert Hospital
Froedtert Children's Hospital
Leukemia & Lymphoma Society
Medical College of Wisconsin
National Marrow Donor Program/Be The Match
Ohio State University
Oregon Health and Science University
Presbyterian St. Luke’s Medical Center
Stanford Blood & Marrow Transplant Program, Stanford Medicine

Stanford Blood Center
University of Mississippi Medical Center
University of North Carolina
Vanderbilt University Medical Center
West Penn Hospital Allegheny Health Network