May 20, 2024

The Honorable Xavier Becerra Secretary U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 200 Independence Avenue, SW Washington, DC 20201

## Dear Secretary Becerra:

The undersigned organizations, representing a broad range of clinicians and providers nationwide, write to you today for further clarification about how the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services' (HHS) Office for Civil Rights (OCR) intends to enforce the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)-related reporting requirements involving the Change Healthcare cyber incident announced on February 21<sup>st</sup>. We are writing to request more clarity around reporting responsibilities and assure affected providers that reporting and notification obligations will be handled by Change Healthcare.

OCR should publicly state that its breach investigation and immediate efforts at remediation will be focused on Change Healthcare, and not the providers affected by Change Healthcare's breach.

Healthcare clinicians and providers take seriously their responsibility to safeguard and protect their patients' data. Since the attack became known, concerns among our members have mounted related to what could – from all indications – amount to the largest breach of the healthcare sector. Change Healthcare processes claims on behalf of hundreds of thousands of clinicians and providers, and several terabytes of possibly protected health information are alleged to have been stolen and held for ransom.

On April 22<sup>nd</sup>, United Health Group (UHG), of which Change Healthcare is a business unit, issued a <u>press</u> release offering limited details that stated, "Based on initial targeted data sampling to date, the company has found files containing protected health information (PHI) or personally identifiable information (PII), which could cover a substantial proportion of people in America. To date, the company has not seen evidence of exfiltration of materials such as doctors' charts or full medical histories among the data." Contrary to media reports – as well as information we have heard from our respective members – there are indications that certain data may indeed have been compromised, resulting in a perplexing situation for providers tasked with ensuring the privacy and security of PHI and PII.

This unprecedented cyberattack raises the question of how OCR plans to reassure the provider community regarding breach reporting obligations under HIPAA, and to clarify that is the responsibility of the covered entity which experienced the breach—UHG—to fulfill its obligations in regard to reporting the breach to OCR, notifying each affected individual, as well as any further HIPAA breach reporting requirements that may be applicable, such as notifying state Attorneys General and media outlets. Numerous providers continue to grapple with the far-reaching consequences of this incident, and financial recovery remains elusive as the situation continues to get fully resolved. This has been exacerbated by a lack of clarity and definitive information offered by UHG and Change Healthcare.

OCR has said they have initiated investigations of Change Healthcare and UHG, and they issued a set of <u>frequently asked questions</u> (FAQs) on April 19<sup>th</sup> referencing the "unprecedented magnitude of this cyberattack." While a breach report is still forthcoming from UHG, they have said that "while the covered entity is ultimately responsible for ensuring individuals are notified, the covered entity may delegate the responsibility of providing individual notices to the business associate. Covered entities and business associates should consider which entity is in the best position to provide notice to the individual, which may

vary, depending on the circumstances, such as the functions the business associate performs on behalf of the covered entity and which entity has the relationship with the individual."

UHG has stated they "are committed to doing everything possible to help and provide support to anyone who may need it" and has pledged "To help ease reporting obligations on other stakeholders whose data may have been compromised as part of this cyberattack, UnitedHealth Group has offered to make notifications and undertake related administrative requirements on behalf of any provider or customer." While we appreciate these statements, we are concerned that without further guidance from OCR, clinicians and providers have not received sufficient confirmation from OCR that HIPAA breach reporting and notification requirements related to this incident are the responsibility of UHG/Change Healthcare as the HIPAA covered entity which experienced the breach of unsecured PHI.

Providers affected by this breach are so numerous that a specific number is not readily available. A simple affirmation from OCR, as requested herein, that UHG, as the covered entity which experienced the breach is responsible for fulfilling the attendant breach reporting and notification requirements, is badly needed to address the lack of clarity among the community of affected providers. Given UHG's statement that it is prepared to fulfill these reporting and notification requirements, it appears that it would be a quick and straightforward matter for OCR to confirm publicly that the HIPAA breach notification and reporting requirements are applicable to UHG and not to the affected providers. Given the well documented state of chaos in the provider community in the wake of this breach, OCR's silence on this point is disappointing.

In addition, OCR must affirm its position that the breach was perpetrated upon Change Healthcare, whose status as a health care clearinghouse makes them a covered entity under HIPAA and thus responsible for the breach of any PHI which it processes or facilitates the processing of. Because Change Healthcare experienced impermissible access to unsecured PHI that it processed on behalf of other covered entities, no entity other than Change Healthcare, its parent company, UnitedHealth Group, and their corporate affiliates such as Optum, bears responsibility for this breach and is under any legal reporting or notification obligation as a result of it.

Given the statement by UHG that, "UnitedHealthGroup has offered to make notifications and undertake related administrative requirements on behalf of any provider or customer," **OCR should confirm that any affected provider may rely upon that statement and, as UHG bears sole responsibility for the breach, no breach notification requirements apply to any affected medical provider.** 

While we appreciate OCR's FAQs, **OCR should publicly state that their breach investigation and immediate efforts at remediation will be focused on Change Healthcare, and not the providers affected by Change Healthcare's breach.** 

For medical providers affected by the UHG ransomware attack, their chief responsibility patient care. These providers may lack clarity regarding what is required of them under HIPAA in this instance and so we call upon HHS-OCR to take the simple step of confirming the above, to publicly to ease concerns in the provider community. We appreciate the opportunity to bring this matter to your attention as we navigate the fallout from this assault on patient care and the privacy of their medical information.

Sincerely,

College of Healthcare Information Management Executives (CHIME)
American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA)
American Medical Association
Medical Association of the State of Alabama
Alaska State Medical Association

Arizona Medical Association

**Arkansas Medical Society** 

California Medical Association

Colorado Medical Society

Connecticut State Medical Society

Medical Society of Delaware

Medical Society of the District of Columbia

Florida Medical Association Inc

Medical Association of Georgia

Hawaii Medical Association

Idaho Medical Association

Illinois State Medical Society

Indiana State Medical Association

Iowa Medical Society

Kansas Medical Society

Kentucky Medical Association

Louisiana State Medical Society

Maine Medical Association

MedChi, The Maryland State Medical Society

Massachusetts Medical Society

Michigan State Medical Society

Minnesota Medical Association

Mississippi State Medical Association

Missouri State Medical Association

Montana Medical Association

Nebraska Medical Association

**Nevada State Medical Association** 

New Hampshire Medical Society

Medical Society of New Jersey

**New Mexico Medical Society** 

Medical Society of the State of New York

North Carolina Medical Society

North Dakota Medical Association

Ohio State Medical Association

Oklahoma State Medical Association

Oregon Medical Association

Pennsylvania Medical Society

Rhode Island Medical Society

South Carolina Medical Association

South Dakota State Medical Association

**Texas Medical Association** 

**Utah Medical Association** 

Vermont Medical Society

Medical Society of Virginia

Washington State Medical Association

West Virginia State Medical Association

Wisconsin Medical Society

American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology

American Academy of Dermatology Association

American Academy of Emergency Medicine

American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery (AAFPRS)

American Academy of Family Physicians

American Academy of Neurology

American Academy of Ophthalmology

American Academy of Pediatrics

American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation

American Academy of Sleep Medicine

American Association of Neurological Surgeons

American Association of Neuromuscular & Electrodiagnostic Medicine

American Association of Orthopaedic Surgeons

American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology

American College of Cardiology

American College of Emergency Physician

American College of Gastroenterology

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

American College of Physicians

American College of Radiology

American College of Rheumatology

American Gastroenterological Association

American Geriatrics Society

American Orthopaedic Foot & Ankle Society

American Osteopathic Association

American Psychiatric Association

American Society for Dermatologic Surgery Association

American Society for Radiation Oncology

American Society of Anesthesiologists

American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery

American Society of Clinical Pathology

American Society of Nephrology

American Society of Neuroradiology

American Society of Plastic Surgeons

American Society of Regional Anesthesia and Pain Medicine

American Society of Retina Specialists

American Society of Transplant Surgeons

Association for Clinical Oncology

Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC)

College of American Pathologists

Congress of Neurological Surgeons

Medical Group Management Association

North American Neuromodulation Society

North American Spine Society

Renal Physicians Association

Society for Pediatric Dermatology

Society for Vascular Surgery

Society of Interventional Radiology

The American Academy of Otolaryngology - Head and Neck Surgery

The American College of Radiation Oncology, Inc.

cc: Melanie Fontes Rainer, Director, Office for Civil Rights, Department of Health and Human Services