An analysis of ZIP codes chosen by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) for mandatory participation in the Radiation Oncology (RO) Model finds that over half have higher than average rates of COVID-19 (novel coronavirus) infection. The analysis finds that 55 percent of RO Model ZIP codes have rates of COVID-19 infection higher than the median across all ZIP codes. Within RO Model ZIP codes, the average COVID-19 infection rate is 5.8 percent higher than the average of all U.S. ZIP codes.

The analysis, commissioned by the Community Oncology Alliance (COA) and conducted by Avalere Health, identified ZIP codes within the RO Model participating in Core-Based Statistical Areas and mapped them to counties in order to analyze COVID-19 disease burden obtained from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/USAfacts.

COA's Executive Director Ted Okon slammed the decision to push forward with implementation of the RO Model, saying that the data demonstrates a flagrant disregard for the challenges faced by oncology practices in managing a public health emergency while providing safe patient care.

"A pandemic is not the time to experiment with the cancer care system, and now we know RO Model participants are in riskier areas. Forcing local cancer care providers who are putting their lives on the line to care for some of the nation's sickest patients to participate in a misguided experiment will cost lives," he said. "We don't ask firefighters to change what they're doing while they are in a burning building. We should not ask cancer care providers either to change during a national emergency. COA has a long, documented commitment to oncology payment reform, but we cannot support a model that distracts as oncology practices are bracing for the third
wave of COVID-19, with close to 63,000 new cases in just one day, coupled with an uncertain flu season.”

As COA noted in a letter earlier this month to Health & Human Services Secretary Alex Azar and CMS Administrator Seema Verma, it is extremely dismaying that in the middle of a still raging pandemic the Administration intends to implement a mandatory experiment on cancer care that endangers the nation's fragile cancer care system. COA urgently requests that the Administration stop the scheduled January 1, 2021 implementation of the Radiation Oncology Model so that practices can focus on providing safe care during these challenging times.

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About the Community Oncology Alliance: The majority of Americans battling cancer receive treatment in the community oncology setting. Keeping patients close to their homes, families, and support networks lessens the impact of this devastating disease. Community oncology practices do this while delivering high-quality, cutting-edge cancer care at a fraction of the cost of the hospital setting. The Community Oncology Alliance (COA) advocates for community oncology and smart public policy that ensures the community cancer care system remains healthy and able to provide all Americans with access to local, quality, affordable cancer care. Learn more at www.CommunityOncology.org.

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