January 14, 2019

Dr. Elinore McCance-Katz
Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857

Re: State Targeted Opioid Response Grants

Dear Dr. McCance-Katz:

As the nation’s oldest and largest organization representing cities, towns and villages, the National League of Cities (NLC) is committed to helping municipal leaders build better communities. Among the many issues that confront cities is the issues of substance abuse. As you well know, more than 70,000 people in the United States died from a drug overdose in 2017. And while great progress is being made, cities also face new and changing issues as opioids are being coupled with an uptick in heroin, fentanyl, cocaine and methamphetamine usage.

Unfortunately, as we speak to mayors and municipal officials from across the country, they are telling us that the billions of dollars in funding to combat the opioid epidemic that was approved in 2016, 2017 and 2018 is not making it to the local level. While this money remains unspent, communities across our country are struggling to meet the ongoing needs associated with this devastating epidemic and we urge the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to work to ensure that these funds are spent quickly and are accounted for.

We hope that you will work together with us to ensure that funds are being put to use by the states to provide prevention, intervention, treatment and recovery services in communities that have been the hardest hit by overdoses. We strongly believe that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) must require states to provide a detailed report on how the money is being used to support local programs. States must be held accountable on how they are using the money to address local concerns. We are concerned that if the federal government continues to appropriate money with no follow-through, audit or scrutiny, only a fraction of
the money will continue to make it down to cities, limiting the good we can do together.

NLC is doing everything we can to uplift promising practices, share information amongst cities, and advocate for additional federal resources to local governments. In 2016, NLC established the City-County National Taskforce on the Opioid Epidemic, jointly with the National Association of Counties. The group spent nearly a year learning about and visiting different communities across the country to develop a set of recommendations for how local leaders should address the crisis. Since then, NLC has released additional publications, hosted workshops and town hall discussions and conducted our first-ever Mayors’ Institute on Opioids, which includes a year of technical assistance for six cities. But we know that the devastation of the epidemic continues to grow.

City leaders know the devastation of the opioid crisis firsthand. We console grieving families of loved ones lost to overdose. We take the phone calls and answer the knocks on the door when tragedy strikes time and time again. We know the ins and outs of our neighborhoods and communities, where people are dying and how. This is personal for us – we need access to all of the tools possible to fight back. City leaders know where to put the money so that it makes the biggest difference. Whether that’s directly to our cities, to the counties or the local providers, it needs to make its way to the local level. Federal-local partnership is the most effective path forward to combatting the opioid crisis.

We hope that we can count on you to share with us exactly how the Fiscal Year 2017 and 2018 funds have been allocated and spent in each state. For the states who have a large portion of their funds unspent, we hope that you will require them to submit a detailed plan for how the plan to use this money and, importantly, how they plan to work with cities to ensure that these funds made it to the local level. And, finally, we hope that you will gather best practices from across the country that can be shared with cities who do not yet have the capacity to adequately respond to this epidemic. Leaders learn from one another and we hope that by ensuring access to best practices from the across the country, we can continue to make meaningful progress in addressing substance abuse challenges today and in the future.
We look forward to continuing to work with you on this critical issue for cities. Our staff will be following up with your office to request a meeting to discuss our concerns but, in the meantime, if you have any questions regarding our letter or to provide direct follow-up, I encourage you to reach out to Stephanie Martinez-Ruckman, Program Director for Human Development, at 202-626-3098 or martinez-ruckman@nlc.org, or Yucel Ors, Program Director for Public Safety at 202-626-3124 or ors@nlc.org.

Sincerely,

Clarence E. Anthony  
CEO and Executive Director  
National League of Cities

Karen Freeman-Wilson  
Mayor, Gary, Indiana  
President, National League of Cities

Cc:  
Senator Roy Blunt  
Senator Patty Murray  
Senator Lamar Alexander  
Representative Rosa DeLauro  
Representative Tom Cole