October 17, 2025

The Honorable Howard Lutnick
Secretary
Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

RE: Notice of Request for Public Comments on Section 232 National Security Investigation of Imports of Personal Protective Equipment, Medical Consumables, and Medical Equipment, Including Devices (BIS-2025-0258, XRIN 0694-XC134)

On behalf of the National Retail Federation and pursuant to the Federal Register notice published by the Bureau of Industry and Security, U.S. Department of Commerce regarding the above-referenced investigation, we are submitting the following written comments regarding the important role retail plays in ensuring consumers have adequate access to affordable personal protective equipment, medical consumables and medical devices, and the likely impacts of policies that would limit availability and raise the costs of these products would have on American families.

I. Introduction

NRF passionately advocates for the people, brands, policies and ideas that help retail succeed. Retail is the nation's largest private-sector employer, contributing $5.3 trillion to annual GDP and supporting one in four U.S. Jobs — 55 million working Americans. NRF empowers the industry that powers the economy. For over a century, NRF has been a voice for every retailer and every retail job, educating, inspiring and communicating the powerful impact retail has on local communities.

Our members include those who provide consumers with ready access to affordable medical products that they use regularly. In addition, some of our members with pharmacies have staff and technicians who need ready access to these products to perform their jobs. The investigation would sweep up a large number of these products and, depending on the size of the tariffs, have potentially serious impacts on retail workers and consumers, particularly those in lower income households. Products of particular concern to NRF members include (but are not limited to) gauze/bandages, masks, gloves, hearing aids, eyeglasses (frames and lenses), contact lenses, insulin pumps, blood glucose monitors, blood pressure machines, crutches and wheelchairs. U.S. national security interests would *not* be advanced by imposing tariffs on these everyday consumer goods.

Introducing elevated tariffs on imported personal protective equipment or medical devices under a Section 232 regime would likely raise costs across the board. Hospitals, surgical centers, physician and nonphysician providers, pharmacies, insurers and ultimately patients absorb those

increased costs. And tariff-driven price increases for critical apparatus like non-robotic prosthetics, pacemakers or hearing aids could push these devices out of reach for those who rely on them. This is especially concerning given that these devices often have limited competition, narrow margins and high development costs. In the balance between bolstering domestic capability and preserving affordability, policies must err on the side of ensuring continued access, not jeopardizing it with protectionist measures that may backfire on public health.

The integrity of the supply chain for PPE and medical devices is central to national health security. Devices such as insulin pumps and blood glucose monitors are integral to daily care for millions of Americans and any disruption to their availability would have severe public health consequences. Today, imports play a crucial role in ensuring that patients and providers have consistent access to these critical devices and supplies. The United States sources significant volumes from trusted partners such as Mexico, Germany, Ireland and Southeast Asia, reflecting a global network that supports both affordability and availability for American consumers.

II. Market Dynamics

The investigation encompasses a large number of everyday medical-related products purchased by consumers at retailers in every community. Every U.S. household would potentially be affected by tariffs imposed on one or more of these products.

While the U.S. government and private sector have made significant efforts to boost domestic manufacturing of medical devices, the gap between capacity and demand remains wide. The domestic medical device manufacturing industry is large and innovative, employing hundreds of thousands of workers, driving exports and supporting high-tech R&D and infrastructure — but it still cannot fully meet the diverse and specialized demand. Imports are therefore not a vulnerability but rather an essential complement to domestic production, ensuring that Americans have access to the full range of reliable, high-quality devices needed for daily health and long-term care.

Some specific issues that have been raised by NRF members include:

Bandages and Gauze

These are products found in every household medicine cabinet. If retailers are forced to raise prices because of tariffs imposed under this investigation, consumers would bear the bulk of the higher costs. Some may shift from brand name bandages to store brands to take advantage of lower costs afforced by nonbranded goods. Consumers who need bandages have limited ability to avoid the purchase altogether.

Eyeglasses

Eyeglasses are everyday products that address widespread vision correction needs. According to the Vision Council, more than 240 million adults in the United States, or 92% of

the population, regularly use some form of eyewear.[1] The majority of eyeglasses sold in the United States are sourced through international supply chains with limited to non-existent domestic alternatives. In recent years, the market has exhibited product shifts that suggest consumer preference for more "budget friendly" eyewear.[2] Adding tariffs to the cost of eyewear would force many consumers to decline to purchase this price-sensitive product. The higher costs would be a particular burden for low-income households and those with young families. Eyecare services and products can be expensive, particularly for low-income households — so much so that the National Eye Institute lists a number of organizations that offer programs that provide eye services and eyewear at low or no cost to qualifying households.[3]

Hearing Aids

Section 232 tariffs on hearing aids would negatively impact seniors who already face high costs and limited insurance coverage for these products. As the senior population grows in coming years, the need for these products will grow with it. But seniors are price sensitive and if the cost of hearing aids — imported or U.S.-produced — increases as a result of tariffs, many will go without. Studies[4] have documented that hearing loss is associated with a higher risk of loneliness and social isolation, and if seniors decline to purchase hearing aids because of tariff-induced higher costs, these repercussions will grow.

Gloves and Masks

Medical gloves and masks have evolved since 2020 from products largely used in hospitals and other medical facilities to products regularly purchased by many consumers at retail stores, and also used by retail store employees (in store pharmacies, for example). While supply shortages have eased considerably since the end of the pandemic, they are by no means gone altogether, and tariffs on imports remain a concern. Increasing those tariffs would only negatively impact consumers and retailers, with no benefit to U.S. national security.

In each of these cases, the products that would be subject to Section 232 tariffs that are sold by retailers to American households do not present the same national security concerns as devices integral to urgent health or defense needs, such as ventilators or surgical instruments.

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[1] The Vision Council, "U.S. Optical Industry Grows to $68.3 billion, According to the Vision Council's New Market Insights Report," January 23, 2025, https://thevisioncouncil.org/blog/us-optical-industry-grows-683-billion-according-vision-councils-new-market-insights-report?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

[2] Ibid.

[3] National Eye Institute, "Get Free or Low-Cost Eye Care," https://www.nei.nih.gov/learn-about-eye-health/healthy-vision/get-free-or-low-cost-eye-care.

[4] Aishwarya Shukla et al, "Hearing Loss, Loneliness, and Social Isolation: A Systematic Review," Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery, Volume 162, Issue 5, May 2020, pp 622-633, https://aao-hnsfjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1177/0194599820910377.

These are non-strategic, low-risk, essential medical devices and as such should be exempted from Section 232 tariffs.

III. U.S. Trade Policy Options: Potential Impacts

NRF offers the following recommendations:

- **Exempt current Section 301 China tariff exclusions and goods qualifying under the Nairobi Protocol to the Agreement on the Importation of Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Materials Act of 1982 from tariffs**. The administration has correctly exempted critical medical devices such as insulin delivery systems, diagnostic equipment and protective gear from Section 301 China tariffs, recognizing their essential nature, and as such, **should not** place tariffs on these same items under this Section 232 investigation.

  In addition, under the Nairobi Protocol, articles and components specially designed or adapted to support individuals with permanent or chronic physical or mental disabilities, such as a bedside commode, transfer bench, cane, rollator walker, shower bench and wheelchair are exempt from existing and reciprocal duties. We believe the administration should honor this commitment during the Section 232 investigation and any resulting tariffs.

- **Phase in the imposition of tariffs over an appropriate period**. If the intent of tariffs is to promote the domestic production of the affected products, the administration should phase in tariffs until production is fully online to reduce harm to consumers. An investigation by the U.S. International Trade Commission regarding the supply chain for COVID-19 related goods (such as PPE, hand sanitizer, gloves and other products that are also the subject of this investigation) found that major factors affecting increased U.S. production included "the availability and costs of inputs, the time and cost of bringing additional production capacity online (including purchasing and installing new machinery), and the time needed to recruit and train new workers. For firms entering the market or bringing new products to the market, challenges also include the time associated with designing products and getting them certified, as well as issues related to a hesitancy among purchasers to use unknown suppliers. Finally, U.S. producers faced, and continue to face, a conundrum when deciding whether to invest in domestic production, as there is little certainty about long-term demand and the ability to recoup investments."[5]

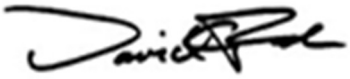
[5] United States International Trade Commission, "USITC Releases Report Concerning the U.S. Industry, Market, Trade, and Supply Chain Challenges for COVID-19 Related Goods," News Release 20-147, Inv. No. 332-580, December 22, 2020, https://www.usitc.gov/press_room/news_release/2020/er1222ll1692.htm.

V. Conclusion

Many of the products subject to this investigation are household staples. Imposing tariffs on them would stretch already tight household budgets, particularly for low-income households, with no ultimate benefit to U.S. national security.

NRF appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on this matter. If you have any questions, please contact me or Jonathan Gold, NRF's vice president of supply chain and customs policy.

Sincerely,



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